

Race/related

Memoirs Are Powerful Currency for This Hmong American Writer

Kao Kalia Yang talks about her recently published memoir, “Where Rivers Part,” which is about her mother’s life.

•



• •

The author Kao Kai Yang as an infant with her mother. Credit...Kao Kalia Yang

By [Maia Coleman](#)

March 29, 2024

This article is also a weekly newsletter. Sign up for Race/Related [here](#).

Stories are precious currency for Kao Kalia Yang, a Hmong American writer.

Yang was born in the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand in the wake of the Vietnam War and the Laotian civil war. Growing up, she often found hope in the stories her grandmother recounted about life in Laos before the war — stories about highland villages where soaring birds cut silhouettes against the jagged mountainside and about family members she had never met.

These memories opened up the world for Yang, cementing a geographic and cultural identity beyond the bamboo huts of the camp.

“I had been trained in the form of the story at the feet of my elders,” she said in a recent interview. “It was just a matter of translation.”

Yang’s family was one of many who fled Laos after 1975, when the communist government took power. During the Vietnam War, [the C.I.A. recruited the Hmong](#) to join its fight against communism in Laos in a campaign now known as the “secret war.”

After America withdrew, [the Hmong were persecuted](#) for their involvement with the U.S., and many, including her family, fled to the jungles of Laos before escaping as refugees to Thailand and eventually being resettled in countries around the world.

The Yangs immigrated in 1987 to St. Paul, Minnesota, which today has one of the largest populations of diasporic Hmong in America.

As a child in the Midwest, Yang struggled to speak English and turned instead to writing, where the words flowed freely.

In her senior year at Carleton College, shortly after her the death of her grandmother, all the stories that had animated Yang’s childhood crystallized into something more tangible.

She began writing what would become her first book, “The Latehomecomer,” the first memoir by a Hmong American to receive national distribution. Written as a “love letter” to her grandmother, the memoir is the first in a trilogy about her family, and set in motion a pursuit that has guided Ms. Yang’s work since: to immortalize the stories of the Hmong, a people who have been underrepresented in literature and history.

More on U. S. Immigration

- **A Mother’s Struggle:** A migrant from Honduras thought she could easily be reunited with her lost son. But when immigration and child welfare are involved, [nothing is straightforward](#).
- **Descending on the Darién Gap:** The treacherous migrant crossing in Panama is drawing packs of right-wing activists from the United States. They [are distorting how immigration is perceived](#), and debated, at home.
- **Iowa Deportation Bill:** Iowa lawmakers [passed a bill](#) that would make it a crime to enter the state after being deported or denied entry into the United States. The passage puts the Midwestern state on track to join Texas in efforts to enforce immigration outside the federal system.
- **Immigration Law:** Texas was once again [prevented from enforcing a strict new law](#) that gives local police agencies the power to arrest migrants who cross the border without authorization, just hours after the Supreme Court [allowed it to temporarily go into effect](#).

The final memoir in that trilogy, “Where Rivers Part,” about her mother’s life, was published this month. Narrated from the first-person perspective of Yang’s mother, the book follows her from her childhood in 1960s Laos, through her escape and her marriage to Yang’s father and, finally, to the unfamiliar life she begins in the U.S.

Yang spoke to The New York Times about the book. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Why did you choose the memoir form to tell this story?

Memoir, in this country, has always been in the realm of the rich and the famous. We read memoirs to learn about the lives of illustrious people. I’m writing these memoirs about poor people, men and women who are often overlooked. In many ways, I hope that my body of work is democratizing the form and the genre.

I’ve always loved memoir because I live in the realm of memories. I was a kid born in a camp. I couldn’t go to school. I couldn’t read or write. Memoirs opened up my world in phenomenal ways, and it was always through memories. A piece of my heart wants to be able to do that for my readers.

I studied creative nonfiction writing at Columbia and read a lot of memoirs and nonfiction, but I read a lot about war. The depictions of war have always been mostly by white men. I wanted to add to that.

I’m Hmong. We’re pretty much absent from the history books. A long time ago our written language was taken from us, and so we’ve had to live only with the help of the oral tradition. I feel like I’ve been reunited with a tool and I want to use it to do as much good as I can.

How do you see this memoir fitting into your larger body of work?

In my head, in my heart, it was always going to be the closing story in the trilogy.

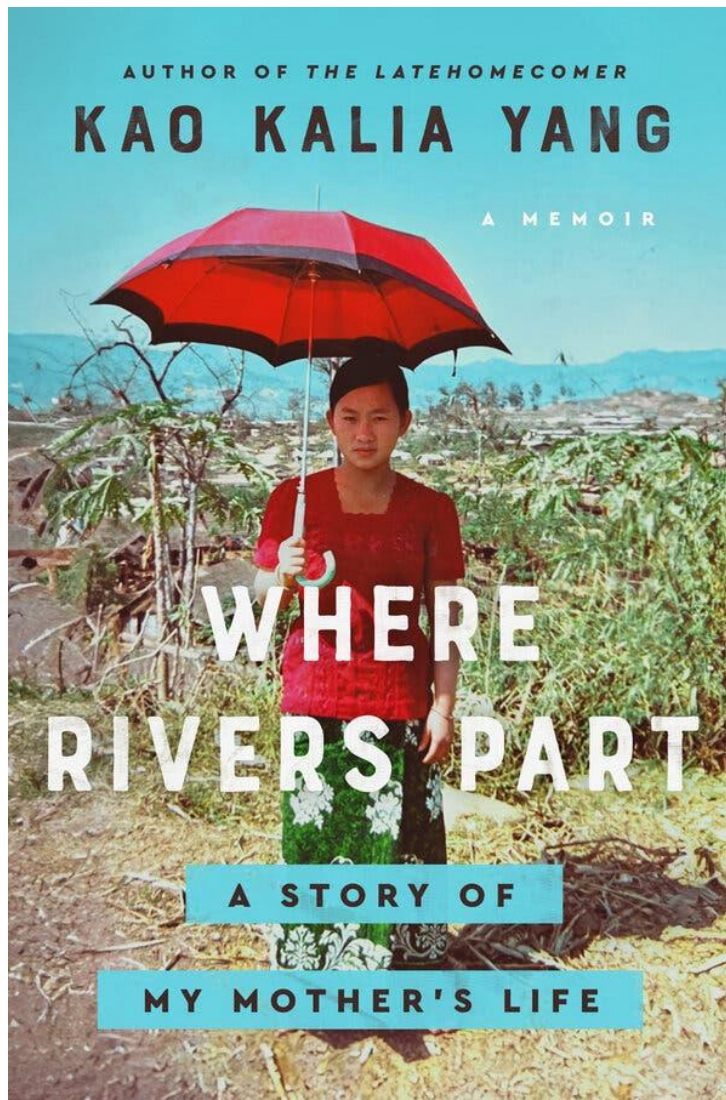
I wanted to do my mother’s story for a long time, in large part because my mother is so quiet and people often don’t understand her. They look at her and they see this refugee woman.

She’s this woman with incredible pride. In such an imperfect world, my mother is a perfectionist. That part of her is intact, even through all of this.

She married a man who lives somewhere in the ether of dreams. My mom is constantly holding the hard reality. She is the one who uses WIC vouchers at the grocery store and the one who disappears so that we can have Christmas because she’s gone to Toys for Tots.

I see so many other mothers like her in the world.

Image



The cover of the writer Kao Kalia Yang's memoir "Where Rivers Part." Credit...Kao Kalia Yang

One of the central forces in the book is this invisible American hand that catalyzes so much of the conflict that the characters face. Who is the character of America in the memoir?

When I first became a writer, people said, "Aren't you angry at America?" Anger, for me, is not a productive emotion. America, like so many other great world powers, has hurt lots of people. Many of them don't have the power and the ability to speak the truth of history. But where else in the world can a young writer like me emerge? I was born in a refugee camp. I was given one of the best educations that money can buy. There are these publishers across the American landscape who say, "Do the work that your heart burns to do." There are journalists like you who say, "Kalia, share your story." There's something here that's intrinsically America.

So I don't hate America, I don't think my family hates America, but I think we understand what America has done.

In the book's final section, your family returns to Laos and you describe this heartbreak that your mother feels revisiting a homeland that is no longer hers. What was the experience of finding a country that had changed?

I had no idea how many stories were waiting there. I somehow thought that we had left with the stories that would be ours.

For my mom, it was incredibly hard to realize that her brothers are no longer the same. The Hmong don't live in the high mountains anymore. The politics are different. The dangers are different.

Here my parents are not American. There, in Laos, they're so American, which is such an interesting dynamic.

How did that translate when you came back to America?

My mom said that the moment the plane landed in Chicago, she felt like she was home, like all of America was home.

Did that provide a resolution?

A dawning. A realization at how everyone looks at my parents. In the Twin Cities, they're Hmong. Outside of the Twin Cities, they're Asian. In Southeast Asia, they were Asian Americans.

Here, I'm a Minnesota author. The moment I leave Minnesota, I become an American author. Here, I'm Hmong American. The moment I leave Minnesota, I'm Asian American. The moment I leave America, everybody says, "You're an American writer." The ability to look at our lives again, to adventure to these places and to return allows us to see the scope of the journey.

My mom and dad both saw the scope of that journey.

Invite your friends.

Invite someone to subscribe to the [Race/Related](#) newsletter. Or email your thoughts and suggestions to racerelated@nytimes.com.

•