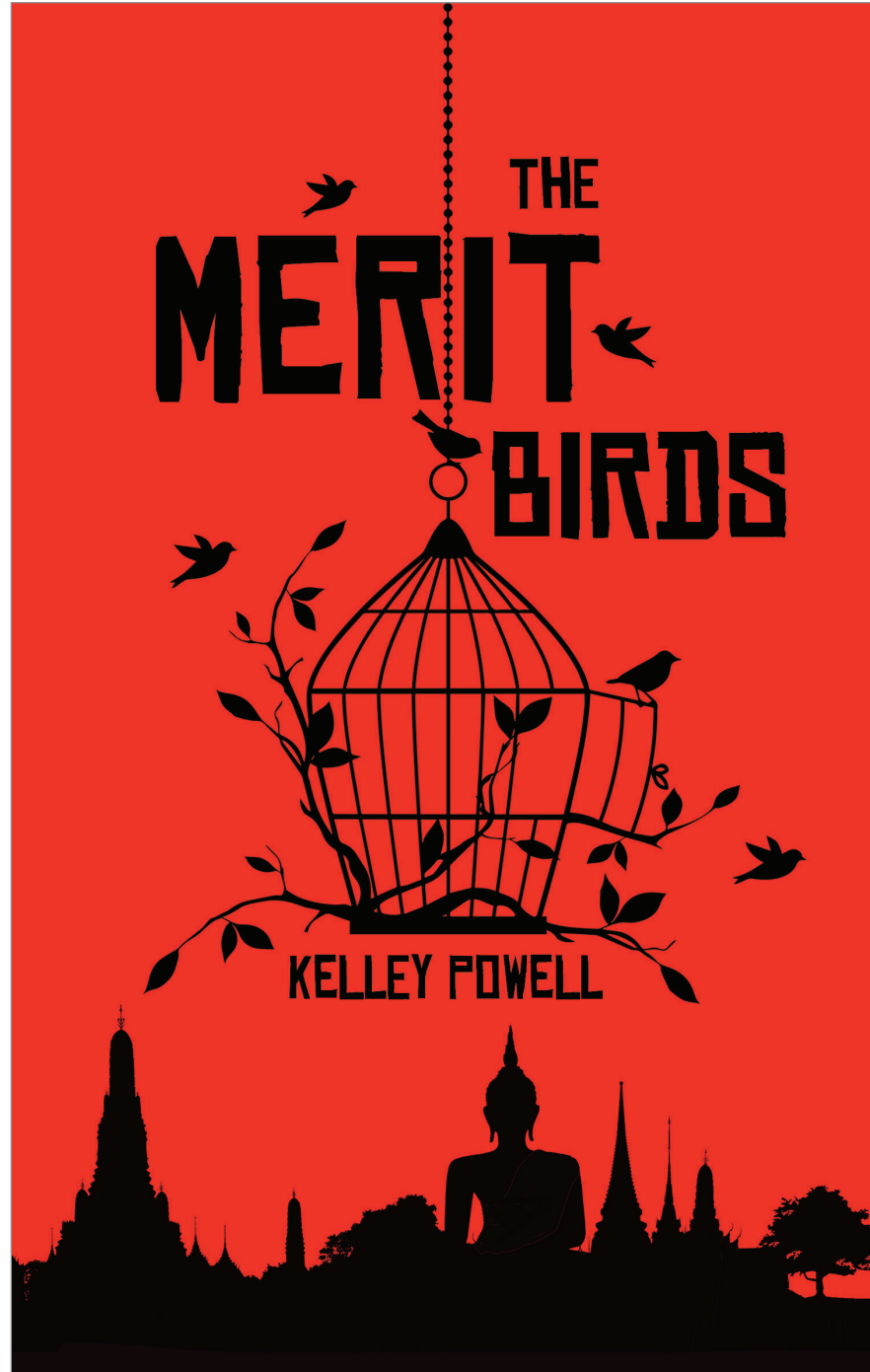


TEACHER'S GUIDE



Developed by Kelly Powell ©2015
ISBN: 9781459732889

“This story is big and bold and important. There’s culture and politics. History. Religion and ritual.
Poverty and wealth. East and West.”

— Sharelle Byars Moranville, author of *The Hop*

“The Merit Birds is a page turner! Young adults far and wide will fall in love with the likable,
genuine and inspiring characters. High school classrooms will be filled with students (and teachers)
unable to put this book down!”

—Laurie Mears Redden, Saskatchewan Teachers Federation

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Eighteen-year-old Cam Scott is angry. He's angry about his absent dad, he's angry about being angry, and he's angry that he has had to give up his Ottawa basketball team to follow his mom to her new job in Vientiane, Laos. However, Cam's anger begins to melt under the Southeast Asian sun as he finds friendship with his neighbour, Somchai, and gradually falls in love with Nok, who teaches him about building merit, or karma, by doing good deeds, such as purchasing caged "merit birds." Tragedy strikes and Cam finds himself falsely accused of a crime. His freedom depends on a person he's never met. A person who knows that the only way to restore his merit is to confess. *The Merit Birds* blends action, suspense and humour in a far-off land where things seem so different, yet deep down are so much the same.

Themes Explored

- Anger
- Mindfulness and Meditation
- The meaning of freedom
- The limits of friendship
- The relationship between teenage sons and their mothers
- International development and poverty issues
- Can students list more themes?

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

(APPROPRIATE FOR A VARIETY OF SUBJECTS)

1. Put up a map of Laos or of Southeast Asia in your classroom.
2. Divide the class into groups. Each group makes three columns on one piece of paper. In one column the group brainstorms everything they currently know about Laos or Southeast Asia (without doing any research). Students can brainstorm on a variety of topics, such as food, religion, politics, weather, environment or poverty. In the second column students list major issues they think teens in Southeast Asia deal with. In the third column students jot down how they imagine Southeast Asian teens view the West. As a class, share the guesses on a flipchart sheet. Repeat the exercise after reading the novel and compare results.
 - i) Ask students to journal on one or all of the following:
 - ii) Write your own personal definition of freedom.
 - iii) What strategies do you use to deal with anger?
3. Recall a time when you felt like a “fish out of water” (perhaps when you visited a different country or city, started a new school, joined a new team or tried something for the very first time). How did you respond?
4. Students formulate five questions regarding what they want to know about Southeast Asia, international development or meditation.

POLITICS (CIVICS) OR WORLD HISTORY SINCE 1990

KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING

Communism Fast Facts

- Communism is a type of government based on the idea of everyone sharing everything equally.
- In 1848 Karl Marx, a German philosopher, wrote *The Communist Manifesto*. It included key characteristics of a communist state, such as no private property; one central bank; taxing the rich; no inheritance or property rights, and government ownership and control of education; communication; transportation; factories and agriculture.
- Marx said that capitalism (a system based on the free market and people owning things instead of the government) is a stage that society goes through. According to Marx, it results in a class struggle between the proletariat (people who have to work to live) and the bourgeoisie (people who employ the proletariat).
- Marx believed a communist state was necessary in order to ensure the needs of the proletariat majority were met. He thought that once the class struggle lessened, the state would eventually be unnecessary and society would mature into a stateless, classless and moneyless society.
- The battle between communist and capitalist ideology characterized much of the 20th century.
- There are five remaining communist countries: Laos, China, Vietnam, Cuba and North Korea.

Source: "The Cold War for Kids: Communism." *Ducksters*. Technological Solutions, Inc. (TSI), Nov. 2014. Web. 7 Nov. 2014. <http://www.ducksters.com/history/cold_war/communism.php>.

THINKING

Questions for Class Discussion

1. Marx said that key characteristics of a communist state are: no private property, one central bank, taxing the rich, no inheritance or property rights, and government ownership and control of education, communication, transportation, factories and agriculture. Write these characteristics on the board. How are these characteristics similar to your own country? How are they different?
2. Communism is usually portrayed negatively in Western media. Why? Are there any redeeming qualities of communism? Why do you think the actual practice of communism is so different from the idea of everyone sharing everything equally?
3. Is any country 100% communist or 100% capitalist? In some ways communist countries, such as China and Vietnam, are very capitalist. Why? What communist qualities do capitalist countries like Canada adopt?
4. Freedom is a theme in *The Merit Birds*. How does communism affect the characters' freedom? How does it affect teens living in communist countries today?

COMMUNICATION & APPLICATION

Class Activities

1. What do bombies have to do with political ideology?

As a class, research what North American countries are currently doing to clean up unexploded ordinance (also known as bombies or UXO) in Southeast Asia. What does it have to do with the 20th century struggle between capitalism and communism? Organize a class debate. One side argues that North American countries have a duty to rid Southeast Asia of UXOs while the other side argues that North American countries should not bear this responsibility.

2. ShamWow and Slap Chop: Political Ideology Infomercials (also good for Media Studies)

The ShamWow and Slap Chop are infamous infomercials. Check them out online if you're unfamiliar. Then divide the class in half – one side is capitalist while the other is communist. Divide the students into groups of 2 or 3. Each group must prepare a short infomercial to convince their classmates to “buy” their ideology.

Research and Inquiry – potential projects

Communism in the Past

1. Choose one conflict and explain how it related to the clash between capitalism and communism: the Korean War, Vietnam War, Khmer Rouge or the Cuban Missile Crisis. Use at least one primary source and one secondary source.
2. Write a screenplay that tells the story of the Pathet Lao's overthrow of the royalist Lao government in 1975. Present your play to the class.

Communism Today

1. Choose one modern day problem and explain how it is related to the clash between capitalism and communism. Examples include North Korea, Ukraine, protests in Hong Kong or human rights issues in China. Use at least one primary source and one secondary source.

Why are there large Hmong communities in the United States? What is the connection to the 20th century clash between capitalism and communism?

Communism in the Future

1. Write a piece of speculative fiction on what a stateless, classless and moneyless society would be like. What would be the benefits and disadvantages? Is your story dystopian or utopian?
2. Does communism have a future, or is capitalism here to stay? Pick a side and support it using three key points (or topic sentences). Provide facts and references to back-up your three key points.

WORLD ISSUES: A GEOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING

International Development Fast Facts

- The United Nations set 8 Millennium Development Goals for 2015. These goals have influenced the priorities of development organizations around the world. The goals are to: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development.
- More than 1.3 billion people around the world live in extreme poverty.
- 870 million people do not have enough food to eat. 1 billion lack access to clean drinking water.
- 72 million elementary school children do not attend school; 57% are girls. According to *The New Internationalist* magazine, less than one per cent of what the world spent on weapons each year could have put every child in school by the year 2000.
- There are 2.2 billion children in the world. 1 billion live in poverty.

Source: Shah, Anup. "Poverty Facts and Stats." Global Issues. 07 Jan. 2013. Web. 30 Oct. 2014. <<http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>>.

THINKING

Questions for class discussion

1. As a class, brainstorm your own definition of poverty.
2. Do you think there are goals missing from the Millennium Development Goals? What are they? As a class, quickly look up the U.N.'s Post-2015 Agenda.
3. Poverty exists in wealthy nations too. How is your own country doing on the MDGs?
4. Use the Legatum Prosperity Index to compare Canada and Laos's prosperity rankings (<http://prosperity.com/#!/ranking>). As a class, rank the sub-indices in order of importance to prosperity (the subindices are economy, entrepreneurship and opportunity, governance, education, health, safety and security, personal freedom and social capital).
5. Laos is a landlocked country, but the Lao government is trying to promote it as "land-linked". Define landlocked and land-linked. What are the advantages and disadvantages of Laos's physical geography?
6. After reading *The Merit Birds*, how do you think Laos's physical geography influences Lao culture and people? You may want to consider the Mekong River, or research how the Viengxay caves helped the communist Pathet Lao overthrow the Royalist Lao Government.

COMMUNICATION & APPLICATION

Class activities

1. Dead Aid Debate: the beginning of the end of aid?

Has aid trapped developing nations in a cycle of aid dependency, corruption and more poverty? Organize a class debate. One side argues that aid is necessary while the other argues that aid is harmful. You may want to use Dambisa Moyo's book *Dead Aid* as a resource. If you have permission, film the debate and post it on YouTube. As a class, monitor the comments you receive.

2. Development simulation game

Play a development simulation game with your class to show students the complex issues that arise when tackling problems such as world hunger. Google the game Baldicer.

Research and Inquiry – potential projects

Rick Mercer Rants

1. Research the current development priorities for your own country. Do you agree with them? Create a Rick Mercer style rant to express your opinion (look up Rick Mercer rants on YouTube for examples). Perform your rant for the class.

United Nations Report Card

2. Create a report card for the United Nation's progress on the 8 Millennium Development Goals for 2015. You may choose one country to focus on, or you can assess the UN's MDG progress more broadly. Follow the same structure as your school's report cards but replace each subject with a MDG and assign a mark. In the comments section provide detailed analysis on why you are assigning that grade. Back up your analysis with clearly identified references.

Aid and the Private Sector Blog

3. The approach to international aid has changed significantly in recent years to include more of a reliance on partnerships with the private sector. Do you agree with this change? What are the implications for non-profit international development organizations? Write a response outlining your analysis.

What Can you Do?

- Keep learning! Be sure to read about international development from a variety of sources, not just mainstream media.
- Post, tweet, share. Generate interest for international development issues among your friends and followers.
- Write letters to your elected officials. Ask to meet with them to discuss the global issues you care about.
- Create art and share it widely: YouTube videos, posters, songs or stories.
- Google local groups working on international development issues and join the one that excites you most. (Also see the sidebar on overseas opportunities for youth).

Overseas Opportunities for Youth

Interested in working on international development issues in a developing country? Check out the following organizations: Canada World Youth, Me to We, Child Haven International, CUSO, VSO, Habitat for Humanity

PHYSICAL EDUCATION: MENTAL HEALTH, MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION

KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING

In *The Merit Birds* Cam's change comes, in part, from the lessons he learns from Sai about the power of the breath. The following section (adapted from *Breathe Better to Feel Better* by Kelley Powell, *New Moon Girls* magazine, July/August 2011) explains how the respiratory system works and how it is linked to our emotions. Photocopy it to distribute and discuss in class:

Breathing Backwards

Did you know that when you don't breathe right it can make you feel sad or nervous? But breathing is the easiest thing in the world, right? That's the problem. It's so easy we don't notice our breath. Kids are usually good breathers, but as people grow stress can cause wimpy breathing.

The Respiratory System, a.k.a. the Party in your Chest

Let's look at how breathing works. Lungs are like two balloons inside your ribcage. When you breathe in, or inhale, air goes into your lungs and the balloons are blown up for the party; when you breathe out, or exhale, the party is over and the balloons shrink. Take a deep breath and watch your ribs expand as your lungs get bigger.

Underneath your lungs is your diaphragm, which looks like a popcorn bowl spilled at a party. It's an upside down U-shape. Put your hand on your belly and breathe in. When you inhale your belly should move out. Then the diaphragm can do its job - move down to make space for fresh air. When you exhale, your belly should move in so the diaphragm can push the air up and out. Here's where people get confused.

Breathing Backwards

People can make two main breathing mistakes. One is reverse breathing, which means their bellies move in on the inhale and out on the exhale. The diaphragm can't move like it's supposed to, so there is less space for the breath. Put your hand on your belly and try to reverse breathe. Notice a difference?

The second mistake is shallow breathing (breathing into the chest so the belly barely moves). In both cases, not as much clean air gets into the body. Why is this a problem?

Pump Up the Volume

The air we breathe contains oxygen, which is like music at a party. You can't see it, but you can't have a party without it. Like music, oxygen gives us energy and makes us happy. It also cleans our blood and feeds

our brains. When people don't breathe properly they don't get enough oxygen. Their brains say DANGER! They begin to feel nervous because the body thinks it's in trouble. They may also feel tired, sad or grumpy.

There are many reasons why people don't breathe correctly. Worry about school or a friendship can cause shallow breathing. Some girls and women think they look fat when their bellies move out so they try to suck it in, but a tummy needs to be relaxed in order to take a proper inhale. Over time, wimpy breathing becomes a habit, so even when people aren't stressed they don't take a full breath.

APPLICATION

Class Activity

Learning to Breathe

If space permits, ask students to lie down. Have them put one hand on their chests and one hand on their bellies. Turn down the lights and play some relaxing music if you like.

Part one: Instruct students to take air through their noses all the way down into their bellies (breathing through your nose filters the air). Ask them to exhale through their noses. Make sure their bellies move out on the inhale and in on the exhale.

Part two: Have them inhale with their noses just into their ribcages (not into their bellies). The lower ribs should move out to the sides as the lungs fill up. Now they can exhale.

Part three: Have them breathe through their noses just into their upper chests (not into their ribcages or bellies). They should feel their hands rise on their chests. Exhale.

Now put all three parts together. Deep breathing is like pouring a glass of water. We fill up the bottom first. Ask students to inhale with their noses and fill their bellies, then their rib cages and then their upper chests. When we exhale, it's like pouring the water out of the glass. The water at the top comes out first. Ask them to let the air out of their upper chests first, then their ribcages and then their bellies. Congratulate them. They've just taken a proper breath! But they've got to practice: continue long deep breathing for five minutes.

Do-it-Yourself Chill Out

Stressed? Emphasizing exhaling slows our heartbeats and relaxes our bodies. Here's something students and educators can do at their school desks or even in the middle of a conversation:

- Inhale through the nose for a count of four seconds.
- Exhale through the nose for a count of six seconds.

Keep going for at least a minute, but the longer you do it the more relaxed you'll feel.

Audio Guide to the One Minute Breath

While in jail, Cam learns the One Minute Breath from Sai. Practice this ancient technique with your class by downloading the free audio guide from: <http://themeritbirds.com>. Students may be interested to know that the One Minute Breath and other Kundalini Yoga techniques were once vehemently guarded secrets that were only shared with royalty and military in India because of their power. Kundalini Yoga Master, Yogi Bhanan, risked his life to share these techniques with the West.

THINKING

Questions for class discussion

1. Pick a student volunteer to lead a class discussion about anger. What strategies do students use to deal with their anger? How can the breath help us when we're angry? In *The Merit Birds* Cam says that he can "taste" his anger. What signals do our bodies give when we're starting to feel angry? What are students' external anger triggers (external triggers are things that happen to us)? What are students' internal triggers (these are "self-talk", or the messages we give ourselves)? What can students do when they notice they're starting to feel angry? Ask the student volunteer to record classmates' responses on the board and to monitor the discussion by calling on people to speak.
2. Brainstorm different ways that long deep breathing can help us, such as relaxing and calming us (due to its influence on the parasympathetic nervous system), increasing our energy (thanks to increased oxygen) and stimulating endorphins, which can prevent depression.
3. The Ontario high school curriculum states, "Mental health is much more than the absence of mental illness. Well-being is influenced not only by the absence of problems and risks but by the presence of factors that contribute to healthy growth and development (The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 and 10, Canadian and World Studies, p.5)." Brainstorm what factors contribute to healthy growth and development. Ideas may include a connection to nature, faith, trustworthy friends and family, physical exercise, rest, "unplugged" time, or mindfulness. Using the results of the discussion, have each student write a series of 10 tweets to inform Twitter followers how to promote mental health (students with Twitter accounts may choose whether or not they actually post the tweets. If students do decide to post, use the hashtag #MeritBirds and be sure to include @kelleypowell20 so Kelley can see them).

Class Commitment to Mental Wellness

As a class, commit to practicing the One Minute Breath every day for 5 minutes for one week (teachers included!). Ask students to keep a journal of changes they may notice in mood, energy levels, or health. If the exercise goes well, why not extend the commitment to 40 days?

Need more breathing exercises? Contact Kelley at www.kelleypowell.com.

WORLD CULTURES – RELIGION, LANGUAGE AND ETHNIC MINORITIES

KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING

Overview of religion, culture and language in Laos

Laos is comprised of a variety of cultural groups. Over half of the population is made up of the Lao Loum ethnic group, which practices Theravada Buddhism. In *The Merit Birds*, Nok, Seng, Vong and Somchai are Lao Loum and Buddhist. Lao Loum speak the Lao language used in *The Merit Birds*.

The rest of the Lao population is made up of a wide variety of ethnic groups, such as Hmong, Khmu, Tai Dam and Akha, to name just a few. Many of these ethnic groups practice forms of animism, shamanism or combine Buddhism with animism. They speak a range of different languages.

The dominant Lao Loum ethnic group tends to have better access to education, employment and resources. Many Lao Loum live in the cities of Vientiane, Luang Prabang or Pakse, while ethnic minorities live in the countryside. As mentioned in *The Merit Birds*, some members of the Hmong ethnic minority group still face discrimination for fighting against the communists during the Lao Civil War.

What is animism?

Animism is the belief that the physical and spiritual worlds are not separate. Plants, animals, mountains, rivers and sacred objects can therefore have spirits or souls. Various forms of animism are practiced by indigenous people around the world. Can you think of groups in your own country that practice animism?

Invite a Buddhist to class

Use Google to find a Buddhist temple, centre or association in your community and invite a member to visit your class.

Buddhism Fast Facts:

- Buddhism is the fourth most widely practiced religion in the world. What do you think the first three are?
- Buddhism is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, who lived in South Asia sometime around the 5th century. Siddhartha Gautama sat in meditation under a Bodhi Tree and only arose when he became a Buddha, an enlightened being, free from the cycle of suffering.
- Key Buddhist concepts include reincarnation, karma, nirvana (the end of the cycle of birth and rebirth) and the Noble Eightfold Path (right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration). The Middle Way, which Somchai refers to in *The Merit Birds*, is a guiding principle that focuses, in part, on moderation or non-extremism.

- Buddhists strive to be [mindful](#) and fully aware at all times. Meditation helps some Buddhists focus on the present moment (instead of on the past or future) in order to achieve mindfulness.
- Buddhism is divided into different schools of thought: Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana.

Source: Kelley used Wikipedia to verify her own knowledge of Buddhism, which is based on her World Religion studies at Queen's University, her certification as a Yoga instructor and her experiences with Buddhism in Asia. "Buddhism." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 7 Nov. 2014. Web. 7 Nov. 2014.

THINKING

Questions for discussion

1. Make a list on the board of how Buddhism influences the actions and decisions of the characters in *The Merit Birds*. Does religion influence your actions or decisions, either consciously or subconsciously?
2. Buddhism is growing in popularity in the West. Why?

COMMUNICATION & APPLICATION

Class activities

1. The Hmong Story: General Vang Pao skits

Divide the class into groups of 4 or 5. Each group must research the fascinating story of the Hmong leader, General Vang Pao, and prepare a skit to share the story with the class.

2. Class Debate: Is the U.S. obligated to protect Hmong people?

In *The Merit Birds*, Sai is in jail for helping Hmong people. Why is there a sizeable Hmong population in the United States today? Organize a class debate. One side argues that the U.S. has a duty to protect Hmong people living in Laos, while the other side argues that the U.S. does not.

3. Babble: Cross-cultural Communication

As Cam learned on his bus ride to Vang Vieng, ethnic minorities in Laos speak different languages than the dominant Lao Loum. Babble is game that helps students become sensitive to cross-cultural communication issues. Kelley played this game during her Canada World Youth and CUSO Orientations:

Divide the class into groups. Each group makes up four words of its own language: a greeting, a noun, a verb and an adjective. Everyone in the group should know the words well. Make sure the other groups don't hear!

Come back together as a class and create groups of three. Each member of the group of three must "speak" a different language.

One member of the group is the instructor and teaches the other two members his or her language (without using any English). The two members learning the language are blindfolded while the student instructing is not.

- Switch so that each member of the group has had a chance to be the instructor.
- Have the groups of three repeat the exercise, but this time do not use the blindfolds.
- Afterwards, lead a class discussion. What feelings did the students experience during the game? What communication strategies or teaching aids did they use? Was it easier without blindfolds? How is Babble like real life? How can we improve our cross-cultural communication skills?
- To close the session, ask students to wear their blindfolds again. Each student must call out the made-up greeting from his or her “language” in order to find the other members of their original group.
- End the game with another discussion. How do the students feel when they finally find someone who speaks their “language”? Can “religion” be substituted for “language” in this game (in other words, do people who share a religion feel more comfortable with one another and understand each other better)? Given what the class felt during the game, why do students think the dominant Lao Loum ethnic group tends to have better access to education, employment and resources in Laos? Does one ethnic group enjoy better access to education, employment and resources in your own country? Why?

Audio Guide to Meditation

There are meditative traditions in Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, as well as Buddhism. Download the free audio guide to meditation from <http://themeritbirds.com> (it’s non-denominational). Practice meditating as a class. Afterwards, discuss students’ experience. How does meditation support the practice of Buddhism or other religions? Do any of your students have a regular meditation practice?

Research and Inquiry – potential research projects

1. The Blogging Monk

Most men in Laos are monks at some point in their lives; some women are nuns. Research the role of Buddhist monks and nuns in Laos or another country. Use the results to write a blog describing a day in the life of a Buddhist monk or nun.

2. Comparative Twitter Essay: Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

Write a Twitter essay comparing Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Students may choose whether or not they actually tweet the essay. For an explanation of a Twitter essay visit: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/i-didnt-create-the-twitter-essay-genre-i-just-made-it-popular/article21501315/>

3. What happens when we die?

Pretend you're writing a classroom textbook. Answer this question from the perspective of a Buddhist. Then answer it from your own religious tradition and compare results. If you don't have a religious tradition, choose a religion you'd like to learn more about.

4. Newspaper Article: Communism and Religion?

Often communist governments do not tolerate religious practices. Why? Why is Buddhism tolerated in Laos? Write a newspaper article to provide your answers.

5. Investigative Journalism: Ethnic Minorities

Pretend you are an investigative journalist. Write a newspaper article about the challenges ethnic minorities face in Laos and in your own country. What are the similarities and differences?

GENDER STUDIES

KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING

Gender and Development Fast Facts

- In *The Merit Birds* Nok faces violence at her workplace. According to the UNDP, one-third of all women in the world are subjected to violence. 3 out of every 10 women in the world experience intimate partner violence.
- Two thirds of the world's illiterate people are women.
- 18% of the world's parliamentarians are women.

Source: "Fast Facts: Gender Equality and UNDP." United Nations Development Program. February 2014. Web. 7 Nov. 2014. <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/fast-facts/english/FF-Gender-Equality-and-UNDP.pdf>

- Pregnancy and childbirth are the main cause of death for girls aged 15-19 in the developing world.
- 1.4 billion people in the world live on \$1.25 per day; 70% of these are women and girls.
- One in seven girls is married by the age of 15.
- The more educated a mother, the healthier her children. Research demonstrates that both boys and girls fare better when they have educated mothers and involved fathers.
- In the developing world girls are three times as likely to suffer from malnutrition.

Source: "Girl IQ Quiz Fact Sheet." Plan, Because I am a Girl, 7 Nov. 2014. Web. 7 Nov. 2014. <http://becauseiamagirl.ca/page.aspx?pid=4654>

THINKING

Questions for class discussion

1. Make two columns on the board. In one column list how the female characters in *The Merit Birds* experience poverty (eg. Nok must work instead of going to school, she experiences violence in her workplace, she is mistaken for a prostitute because of the Southeast Asian sex tourism industry; Vong must care for her siblings when her parents are taken, she works in a garment factory to pay for medicine for Nok when she has dengue fever, she marries a Canadian in the hopes of a better life; Emkhan is taken to political re-education camp). In the second column list how the male characters experience poverty (eg. Somchai must work instead of going to school, Seng has no legal recourse when he gets into trouble, Seng's father dies in a political re-education camp, Seng peddles goods to tourists to make money). Create a Venn diagram to see the similarities and differences.

2. Is *The Merit Birds* a feminist novel? Why or why not?

3. The Merit Birds is set in “a far-off land where things seem so different, yet deep down are so much the same.” Gender based violence is an issue that Lao and North American youth share. In fact, between 500 million and 1.5 billion children around the world experience school-related gender-based violence (acts of sexual, physical or psychological violence inflicted in and around schools because of a person’s sex or gender). Nearly a quarter of Canadian girls and, at least 15% of boys, have experienced sexual violence before they reach 16. Why is this problem so pervasive around the world? What can students in Canada, in Laos, or anywhere, do about it? Where can students in your community go for help?

Source: “Gender Based Violence.” Plan, Because I am a Girl, 7 Nov. 2014. Web. 7 Nov. 2014. <http://becauseiamagirl.ca/gender-based-violence>

COMMUNICATION & APPLICATION

Research and Inquiry – potential projects

Investigative Journalism: Sex Tourism in Southeast Asia

Pretend you are an investigative journalist. Write a focus piece for a newspaper about sex tourism in Southeast Asia.

Public Service Announcement for International Flights: Sex Tourism Prevention

Create a public service announcement to prevent sex tourism. Your announcement will be played on international flights to Southeast Asia. If you have permission, post your announcement on YouTube. You never know who you will influence.

What Can you Do?

Check out Young Feminist Wire, an online community “for and by young feminists working on women’s human rights, gender equality and social justice around the world”:<http://yfa.awid.org/> Psst...did you know that boys and men can be feminists too? A feminist is simply someone who believes that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities.

THE ARTS

KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING

Dance – *Lam Vong*

In *The Merit Birds* Somchai refers to a lam vong dance when he's trying to distract Cam from getting his stitches without anaesthetic. Lam vong is known as Rom vong in Cambodia and Ram wong in Thailand. It's a style of folk-dance that is still practiced at weddings and parties in Laos, and in Lao communities across North America.

Lam vong is a circular dance; men stand in one circle while women create another circle around them (or vice versa). Each man is paired with one woman; they move together throughout the dance, but also maintain their place in their respective circles. The man and woman bow to each other at the beginning and end of the song but traditionally they do not make a lot of eye contact. The dancers move slowly using graceful hand movements and simple footwork.

Here is a Lao sample of lam vong. At a party the circle would usually involve many more dancers than what we see here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkJRCrpHdUg>.

APPLICATION

Class activity

1. Organize your own lam vong. The boys in the class stand in one circle while the girls make a circle around them. Each boy is paired with a girl and the partners move together, but also as part of their respective circles. Be creative and make up your own hand movements and footwork! Laugh. How do you think Seng would dance it in *The Merit Birds*?

THINKING

Questions for class discussion

1. What can you deduce from lam vong about relationships between men and women in Southeast Asia? How do you think public displays of affection might be viewed?
2. What words would you use to describe lam vong? Do you think these words could be used to define Lao culture in general?

KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING

Dance and Drama – the Ramayana

In *The Merit Birds* Vong describes a time when her mother snuck her into the Royal Laos Ballet to watch a performance of the Ramayana. The Ramayana is a sacred Hindu epic that is interpreted and performed all over Asia. Phra-Lak Phra-Lam is the Lao version. The Ramayana is divided into seven books that tell the life story of the protagonist, Rama, who is believed to be an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. In *The Merit Birds* Vong talks about the character Sita, who is Rama's wife and an incarnation of the god Lakshmi. When the communists took control of Laos in 1975 they banned performances of the Ramayana but in 2002 the government revived the art form.

Source: Kelley used Wikipedia to verify her own experiences with the Ramayana. "Ramayana." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 30 Oct. 2014. Web. 7 Nov. 2014.

You can see some *Ramayana* performances by the Royal Ballet troupe here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PGDf7YrqTY>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dlwj_hoxvA8

THINKING

Questions for class discussion

1. Research the basic plot line for each of the seven books of the *Ramayana*. Which book do you think is being performed in the first video shown?

COMMUNICATION & APPLICATION

Class activity

1. *Ramayana* skits

Divide the class into groups. Each group must choose a different book of the *Ramayana* and develop a skit to present to the class.

2. Public Displays of... *Ramayana*

As a class, create a tableau to depict a scene in the *Ramayana*. In between periods, re-create it in your school hallway or common area and see what kind of reaction you get!

Search the internet for Lao arts groups in your community. Invite them to perform for your class.

3. *Merit Birds* Tableaux

Divide the class into groups. Each group chooses four scenes from *The Merit Birds* and creates a tableau for each scene. Hold each scene for 20 seconds and then slowly move into the next. Ideas for scenes include: Seng and Vong's escape across the Mekong River, Cam's accident in the cave, Nok's death, Cam and Somchai in the bar in Vang Vieng, Nok's funeral (from the prologue) or Seng watching his mother on Khaosan Road in Bangkok.

Research and Inquiry – potential projects

Graphic: Hinduism and Buddhism

The *Ramayana* is a sacred Hindu tale, but Laos is predominantly Buddhist. Research the link between Hinduism and Buddhism. How are Buddhist versions of the *Ramayana* different? Create a graphic to illustrate the similarities and differences.

Response: What's the Big Deal about the *Ramayana* anyway?

Why do you think the *Ramayana* is still told in so many countries today? Write a response with the title, "What's the big deal about the *Ramayana* anyway?"

Short Story: A Banned Performer

Write a short story from the perspective of a Royal Laos Ballet dancer. Set your story in 1975 when the communists first banned the performance.

KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING

Music – the Khene

The *khene* is a mouth organ made with bamboo pipes. It uses a pentatonic scale. See and listen to it here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTuG9OUTJA8>.

THINKING

Questions for class discussion

1. What instruments are similar to the khene?

COMMUNICATION & APPLICATION

Research and inquiry – potential projects

1. The Legend of the *Khene*

Research the legend of how the *khene* was first discovered by a Lao widow. Create a skit to share the story with your class.

ENGLISH, MEDIA STUDIES AND CREATIVE WRITING

THINKING

Questions for class discussion

1. Why do you think Kelley wrote Cam's chapter using first person and the other characters' chapters using third person?
2. Why is Seng's dialogue in broken English? How does it reveal his character? Similarly, why does Cam swear?
3. Google Lao literature. How does politics influence the literary arts?
4. Choose one adolescent issue explored in *The Merit Birds* (examples might include young love, the relationship between parents and teenagers, conflict with friends or anger). Compare the portrayal of this issue with how it is depicted in another text you've read in class. What role does a story's setting play in the portrayal of an issue?
5. Brainstorm three questions the class would like to ask Kelley about the book. Find Kelley on Goodreads (www.goodreads.com) and post the questions. Afterwards, discuss whether her answers surprised you or confirmed what you already assumed.
6. Make three columns on the board – one for Cam, the other for Seng and the last for Nok. List all of the freedoms each character enjoys. Then list all of the limitations on their freedoms. (Remember that sometimes these limitations come from inside of ourselves. For example, how does Cam's anger about his past limit his freedom in the present?)
7. Did you believe the plot and characters in *The Merit Birds*? Why or why not? What makes plot and characters believable in a story?

COMMUNICATION & APPLICATION

Class activities

Student Editors at Your Service

Each student re-reads the chapter *Freedom Head-on* and writes a blog (or short essay) about what they think the underlying meaning is. Students exchange their work with a partner. Each student uses the Track Changes function in Microsoft Word to comment and edit their partner's work. Teachers may want to have an initial discussion about editing etiquette.

Skits: Choose your Own Choice

Re-read the chapters *The Choice* and *The Way*. Brainstorm other choices Seng could have made. Divide the class into groups. Each group performs a skit on alternative resolutions to Seng's dilemma.

Interview a Secondary Character

Each student chooses a secondary character he or she would like to know more about. Students develop effective questions to interview him or her. Pair the students with one another; one partner pretends to be the chosen character while the other partner conducts the interview. Then switch so both students have the opportunity to play the role of interviewer and interviewee. Students use their knowledge of the characters and story, and their imaginations, to answer the questions.

Research and Inquiry – potential projects (English)

Favourite Character Social Media Profile

Choose your favourite *Merit Birds* character and write a mock social media profile for him or her. Be sure to include basic details such as hometown, relationship status, education, employment, etc (students may wish to use Facebook as a template). Use your imagination, and your knowledge of your character, to list his or her favourite books, movies, quotes and video games. What kinds of online groups might your character belong to?

Write a Review and Publish It

Write a review of *The Merit Birds* and post it on Amazon or Goodreads.

Freedom Slam Poetry

Research the components of spoken word or slam poetry. Look up some examples on YouTube. Write your own performance-based poem about freedom as it is explored in *The Merit Birds*. You may want to pretend you are a particular character, or you may want to represent the concept of freedom more generally. Perform your poem for the class. Get their feedback and revise your performance as you see fit. If you have permission, post your performance on YouTube and share the link with Kelley.

Vlogging Idiots

Seng has difficulty learning English idioms. Research Lao idioms and create a vlog (video blog) to share them with your class. Send your vlog to Kelley.

Research and Inquiry – potential projects (Media Studies)

ShamMao and Slap Cap: Political Ideology Infomercials (also good for Politics or History classes)

The ShamWow and Slap Chop are infamous infomercials. Check them out online if you're unfamiliar. Divide the class in half – one side is capitalist while the other is communist. Then divide the students into groups of 2 or 3. Each group must prepare a short infomercial to convince their classmates to “buy” their ideology.

Rick Mercer Rants

Conduct an online search for 4 or 5 different newspaper articles about Laos. Then make a list of the positive aspects of Laos as it is portrayed in *The Merit Birds*. Do the newspaper articles convey positive qualities about Laos? Why or why not? How do portrayals of developing countries in Western mainstream media influence our perception of them? Was it challenging to find articles about Laos? If so, why do you think this is? Create a Rick Mercer style rant about your findings and perform it for the class (see YouTube for examples of Rick Mercer rants). If you like, post your rant on YouTube and share it with Kelley via Facebook, Twitter or Goodreads.

Far Out Newscast, Dude

Write a newscast to tell your audience about the 1975 takeover of the Lao government by the communist Pathet Lao. Remember you must present the story in an unbiased manner. Have a friend film your newscast and share with the class (for fun, you may want to don a '70s style hairdo or outfit).

Public Service Announcement to Prevent Drinking and Driving

Use the story of Nok's death to create a public service announcement about drinking and driving. Post it on YouTube. You never know who you will influence.

Survey Says

Design a survey to test your peers' knowledge of Laos. Your questions might focus on politics, history, food, culture, religion, language or economic well-being. After conducting the survey, ask your peers the same questions but this time focus on one of the following countries: Vietnam, China or Thailand. Write a blog explaining why we know more about some countries than others.

Capitalist Propaganda Poster (also good for Visual Arts classes)

The Merit Birds is set in communist Laos. Search for images of communist propaganda posters (from any country) on the Internet. Then design a propaganda poster for capitalism. Take a picture of your design and share it with Kelley on social media.

Research and Inquiry – potential projects (Creative Writing)

The Merit Birds Picture Book

Create a children's picture book to describe what a merit bird is. Your story must incorporate a theme.

Create your own Merit Birds Character

Develop your own *Merit Birds* character. Choose a scene in the book and write it from the perspective of your made-up character. Make sure your character has a desire and a weakness.

Write the Deleted Scene

Write a 1500 word short story about Emkhan's escape from political re-education camp. Share your story with Kelley and ask her for the deleted scene!

Lao Poem

Write a poem set in Laos.

Insect Night POV

Re-read the chapter *Insect Night* and re-write it from the perspective of the drunk French man.

ABOUT KELLEY POWELL

Once upon a time there was girl named Kelley. Kelley was terrified of the math centre in her grade school classroom, but man, that creative writing centre made her smile. In her spare time she wrote stories - lots of stories – about rainbows and ghosts and horses named Frankie Hoof Powell. As she grew, she came to believe that being a writer was pretty much impossible. **Dear readers, please do not ever believe that your dreams are impossible.** Sometimes the path to your dream isn't clear but, as Rumi says, if you “let yourself be silently drawn by what you truly love” you will find it. The first step is to chuck doubt out the window.

So, in lieu of writing Kelley decided to do other things. Many of these things also made her smile. She went to Indonesia with Canada World Youth and lived in a one-room hut with a family of 6 villagers and accidentally dropped her sarong while bathing in the village river. She got mistaken for a drag queen while teaching English in South Korea; chased monkeys away from children while volunteering with Child Haven International in India and got tricked into marriage while researching violence against women with CUSO in Laos (eleven years later, she's still married).

Kelley still wasn't a fan of math, but she got a Master of Arts in international development at the University of Guelph anyway. She became a yoga and meditation instructor too. Still, something was missing. It wasn't until Kelley had three small children and no time to write that she decided to get serious about stories again. The result was *The Merit Birds*, her debut novel.

Visit Kelley at www.kelleypowell.com or connect with her on Facebook, Twitter (@kelleypowell20) or Goodreads. She'd love to see any videos you made for the projects suggested in this guide.