

# The Storm We Made

by Vanessa Chan

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## About the Book

**A spellbinding, sweeping novel about a Malayan mother who becomes an unlikely spy for the invading Japanese forces during WWII --- and the shocking consequences that rain upon her community and family.**

Malaya, 1945. Cecily Alcantara's family is in terrible danger. Her 15-year-old son, Abel, has disappeared, and her youngest daughter, Jasmin, is confined in a basement to prevent being pressed into service at the comfort stations. Her eldest daughter Jujube, who works at a tea house frequented by drunk Japanese soldiers, becomes angrier by the day.

Cecily knows two things: this is all her fault, and her family must never learn the truth.

A decade prior, Cecily had been desperate to be more than a housewife to a low-level bureaucrat in British-colonized Malaya. A chance meeting with the charismatic General Fuijwara lured her into a life of espionage, pursuing dreams of an "Asia for Asians." Instead, Cecily helped usher in an even more brutal occupation by the Japanese. Ten years later, as the war reaches its apex, her actions have caught up with her. Now her family is on the brink of destruction --- and she will do anything to save them.

Spanning years of pain and triumph, told from the perspectives of four unforgettable characters, **THE STORM WE MADE** is a dazzling saga about the horrors of war; the fraught relationships between the colonized and their oppressors; and the ambiguity of right and wrong when survival is at stake.

## Discussion Guide

1. ?And as the waxy birthday candle melted into Abel?s dry birthday cake, Cecily knew. Bad things happened to bad people; and she was exactly that --- a bad person (pg. 5). How does this quote help you understand the depths of Cecily?s guilt? What does it tell you about her as a mother?
2. Jujubee contemplates that the Western armies might have forgotten about Malaya. She thinks, ?Maybe people like her, Jasmin, and Abel did not matter --- here in a tiny tropical corner in the East, being brutalized by people who looked almost exactly like them.? What is significant about the West ignoring them as they lay occupied by people who look similar? Based on what you know, or don?t know, about Malaya during the war, do you think this is a reasonable thing for her to suspect?
3. Mr. Takahashi, whose daughter was living in Nagasaki, is distraught after learning that there were no survivors of the West?s bombing of Nagasaki. How do you feel humanity is reflected by Mr. Takahashi being angry at America while also being kind to Malaysians, as well as Jujubee encouraging Mr. Takahashi to have faith, despite the pain her country has suffered at the hands of the Japanese?
4. In what ways does Cecily?s desire to be more than just a housewife, coupled with her eventual consuming mother?s guilt as a result of her past choices, represent the ways in which women and mothers are forced to choose between their family and their own desires/dreams? How is this problem exacerbated by Cecily?s surroundings? How is this pressure still reflected in modern-day society?
5. In what instances does Jasmine reflect childhood innocence? How do you see that innocence being impacted throughout the story by the realities of war?
6. While living under the British occupation and witnessing change, love, loss and grief, along with experiencing some of her own, Cecily concludes that, ?All love was someone breaking their soul into smaller pieces and offering the broken pieces of themselves as a puzzle to someone else. (pg. 127)? How do you feel about this sentiment? Is she right? Does it make sense that she would feel this way given her lived experiences?
7. Despite everything that happened between the two of them and everything he had done, Cecily takes pity on Fujiwara as she watches him and Lina reintegrate into the social scene, particularly as he continuously sacrifices bits of himself in the interest of his ideology. Given how things were with them, how or why do you think Cecily feels sorry for him in the way that she does? How is she eventually able to stop desiring him as strongly?
8. How do you think Cecily is able to love Lina and Gordon and still continue seeing Fujiwara? How do you interpret her actions towards each of them? Do you think her situation is made ultimately more complex as a result of elements such as occupation and war?
9. Things such as Freddie's arrival, his introduction to toddy, and Brother Luke?s death all mark large changes in Abel during his time at the camp. At one point he reflects on how he has had to face his own mortality, focusing each day on doing whatever it takes to stay alive. Do you feel Abel?s humanity changed, or was it simply altered to survive his surroundings? What would it look like for him to remain unchanged in such an environment? Would such a thing even be possible?
10. ?The British had come for the camp and bombed it to hell, to wipe out any way for the Japanese to transport

supplies. And yet the only men who lay on the ground in piles of ash and limbs were conscripted boys who had, against the odds, survived the Japanese torture only to die at the hands of their supposed saviors (pg. 297).? How do the lines of evil and salvation become grayed by war? How does the story of the Alcantara's family, and the war-torn Malaya as a whole, shed light on who is always caught in the crossfires of these lines that are blurred to the point of violence?

**11.** Based on your knowledge or experience with families, siblings and children, how do Jujube, Jasmine and Abel embody their roles in the family dynamic (such as oldest daughter, younger son, youngest daughter, etc.), and how do they differ from the stereotypical personality traits that are often associated with those roles?

**12.** How does the shift in perspective/place/time between chapters allow for a greater understanding of the characters and their situations? How do you feel your experience as a reader might have differed if every chapter only focused on one character?

**13.** By the end of the novel, how has each character changed? In what ways have the horrors of violence and war had an effect on each of them?

## Author Bio

Vanessa Chan was born and raised in Malaysia. Her short stories have been published in *Electric Lit*, *Kenyon Review*, *Ecotone* and more. She was the 2021 Stanley Elkin scholar at the Sewanee Writers Conference and has also received scholar awards to attend the Bread Loaf and Tin House writers' conferences. *THE STORM WE MADE* is her first novel.

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