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# TIGER-TRAPPING IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM: A REVIEW OF *WHEN YOU TRAP A TIGER*

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## Abstract

*When You Trap a Tiger* by Tae Keller is a compelling middle grades novel that explores identity, culture, and loss through Lily’s journey of family, grief, and self-discovery. Blending magical realism with emotional depth, the story encourages readers to find their voice while highlighting the importance of acceptance, cultural understanding, and connection.

**Keywords:** Tae Keller, identity, culture, loss, grief

Published in 2020 by the Random House Books for Young Readers, *When You Trap a Tiger* is a middle grades novel written by Tae Keller. The book was awarded the 2021 Newbery Medal and the Asian/Pacific American Award for Children’s Literature. The story follows Lily and her journey as she learns more about her family, loss, and herself. Lily sees herself as an “invisible girl,” often feeling unnoticed by those around her. However, while traveling with her family to move in with her *balmoni* (the Korean word for grandmother), Lily spots a tiger—that only she can see—in the street staring directly at her. After learning the truth about her *balmoni*’s health, Lily sets out to trap the tiger and make a deal to return the stories *balmoni* “stole” in exchange for healing her grandmother. Throughout the story, Lily’s sister Sam and their mother play important roles as the three struggle to agree on how to care for *balmoni*, each choosing their own solution. Ultimately, the book highlights the tension between believing things can be changed and overall acceptance that what is happening cannot be changed.

What drew me to this book was how invested I became in the story, and I think students would feel the same way. It is hard to put the book down as the storytelling is very compelling and keeps readers curious about what will happen next. The book offers teachers opportunities to discuss themes of identity, culture, and emotional growth, while encouraging readers to find their voice and embrace who they are, taking pride in their own story and the story of where or who they come from. For students who may be struggling with grief, the book is relatable, emphasizing that healing will take time, but no one must go through it alone. By highlighting the importance of family, friends, and community, it motivates readers to find connection and support within the people around them. Additionally, the book is culturally insightful, introducing readers to aspects of Korean culture they may not be familiar with. Students can explore perspectives and lives different from their own while making connections to their own families and experiences.

*When You Trap a Tiger* would be best suited for upper elementary students, particularly in fourth through sixth grade reading classes or reading intervention groups for students reading above grade level. Because of the book's themes and vocabulary, it would work especially well with students who need a more challenging text. The book would be a strong choice for literature circles or small-group reading, where students could keep notes and participate in discussions throughout the novel. Students could use the text to practice making text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections, while also analyzing plot, setting, and character development. The story also provides opportunities to examine the author's diction and discuss how word choice contributes to the mood and meaning of the story.

However, there may be some challenges to incorporating the book in a classroom. Though the book can be an effective way of discussing grief and loss in the classroom, some students may be sensitive to the topics of illness and death. Teachers need to approach these themes with much care, and be prepared to provide emotional support for students who may have personal experiences with loss. Additionally, for some students, this may be their first time thinking about the reality of losing someone close to them, which could be an emotional and difficult realization.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed the novel and believe it would be a valuable addition to an upper elementary classroom. Its engaging storyline and emotional depth make it easy for readers to become invested in Lily's journey, while the themes of identity, culture, grief, and acceptance create opportunities for meaningful discussion. Although teachers would need to approach some topics with care, the book offers students the chance to reflect on their own experiences, learn about perspectives different from their own, and ask important questions. More than anything, *When You Trap a Tiger* is a story that stays with readers and encourages them to think deeply about themselves, their families, and the world around them.

**Generative AI disclosure statement:** Generative AI was used to assist with grammatically reorganizing and refining ideas based on my original drafts. All final content reflects my own understanding and has been reviewed and edited by me.

### **Author Biography**

Hailey Aranda-Mayorga is a student at Wichita State University, studying education and sociology while striving to become an elementary school teacher. Nearing her graduation, she is placed in a fifth-grade classroom for her student teaching semester. Her love for education comes from her desire to empower students and help them recognize that they are capable of great things. She hopes to teach students not only academic skills, but also the confidence and life skills they need to navigate the world around them. She can be reached at [hharanda-mayorga@shockers.wichita.edu](mailto:hharanda-mayorga@shockers.wichita.edu).