

## Book Club Discussion Guide



*How to Pronounce Knife by Souvankham Thammavongsa), Page 1 (October 2023)*

# 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.

Source: Author's website: (<https://souvankham-thammavongsa.com/bio.html>)

## About this book:

A young man painting nails at the local salon. A woman plucking feathers at a chicken processing plant. A father who packs furniture to move into homes he'll never afford. A housewife learning English from daytime soap operas. In her stunning Giller Prize-winning debut book of fiction, Souvankham Thammavongsa focuses on characters struggling to make a living, illuminating their hopes, disappointments, love affairs, acts of defiance, and above all their pursuit of a place to make their own. In spare, intimate prose charged with

## Book Club Discussion Guide



*How to Pronounce Knife by Souvankham Thammavongsa), Page 2 (October 2023)*

emotional power and a sly wit, she paints an indelible portrait of watchful children, wounded men, and restless women caught between cultures, languages, and values. As one of Thammavongsa's characters says, "All we wanted was to live." And in these stories, they do—brightly, ferociously, unforgettably.

A daughter becomes an unwilling accomplice in her mother's growing infatuation with country singer Randy Travis. A former boxer finds a chance at redemption while working at his sister's nail salon. A school bus driver must grapple with how much he's willing to give up in order to belong. And in the title story, a young girl's unconditional love for her father transcends language.

Tender, uncompromising, and fiercely alive, *How to Pronounce Knife* establishes Souvankham Thammavongsa as one of the most important voices of her generation.

Source: Penguin Random House  
(<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/602649/how-to-pronounce-knife-by-souvankham-thammavongsa/9780771094606>)

### 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?

## Book Club Discussion Guide



*How to Pronounce Knife by Souvankham Thammavongsa), Page 3 (October 2023)*

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.

## Book Club Discussion Guide



*How to Pronounce Knife by Souvankham Thammavongsa), Page 4 (October 2023)*

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.

Source: Penguin Random House

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