

**Comparison of the Verse Novels *Little Green* by Chun Yu and *Inside and Out and Back Again* by Thanhha Lai**  
**By Matthew Olin**

A verse novel is a narrative that tells its story through individual poems. It is simply a different way of writing a book; instead of paragraphs, stanzas. Instead of sentences, lines. Thus, these books are like poems because they are told with poems. While I wouldn't call a verse novel a "poem", it is similar to one as the story is told through them. On the other hand, they are not like poems because poems do not usually follow the same system that prose books do; being a poem is different than being made up of poems. Therefore, in this essay, I will compare the verse novels *Little Green* by Chun Yu and *Inside Out and Back Again* by Thanhha Lai by these three criteria: Whether or not the protagonist is "right" for poetry, whether or not the poems can stand on their own, and whether or not the poems work visually on the page and aurally.

The first book, *Little Green*, was very fascinating. The main character, Little Green, is a four-year-old girl in China during the cultural revolution. She seems to be a normal girl for that time period, but she definitely has some special qualities. The book takes place from 1966 until 1976, and it shows the progression that occurs during Little Green's life. The book takes place in between the country and the city of China and has a very complex plot structure. Little Green's father is sent to a May Seventh Cadre Camp at the beginning of the story because of his connections with capitalism, and Little Green is taught in school that the old culture is bad. However, this all conflicts later in the book when Mao Zedong (leader of China during the revolution)'s red guards come across the country to destroy any personal possessions that represent anything of rich value. Little Green's garden is uprooted and many items are stolen. This type of conflict occurs often in the book. I could tell that she was silently in conflict with the communist government; although, as she was being brainwashed at the same time, it was difficult to tell. The book ended with Mao Zedong dying. At this point in the book, I could tell that the ideology of the Cultural Revolution had infiltrated Little Green as she was disappointed in herself for not being able to cry as much as other students. Some of the important (supporting) characters that had a big influence on Little Green were Mama, Baba, Gege (older brother), Sansan (younger sister), Nainai (grandmother), and Mao Zedong.

In the second book, *Inside and Out and Back Again* by Thanhha Lai, the main character, Ha, takes a journey from her homeland of Vietnam to Alabama because of the terror inflicted from the Vietnam war. She loves her homeland, with its food, culture, and especially her papaya tree. Ha seems to be a normal girl living in Vietnam. Although, she's a little different because her father is missing, and they are a little poor. Nonetheless, she loves her country. So, when her family gets an opportunity from a character named Uncle Son to leave the country and seek refuge somewhere else, she is not happy. Although, they end up leaving the same day that South Vietnam falls to the North. She was incredibly lucky. They end up leaving safely and falling into Alabama, where Ha's mother and three brothers are forced to adjust to the new circumstances. This was a major conflict for Ha, along with her father, who was missing because of the war. In Alabama, Ha and her family experience bullying from the locals,

especially (for Ha) from Pink Boy. Yet, she manages to meet a neighbor named Mrs. Washington who helps her learn English and adjust to America. Along with Mrs. Washington, there are many supporting characters. There is the man who sponsored her family, her teacher, her mother, and her many brothers. They all help her along the way; especially her brother, Quang, who is the only one in their family who can speak fluent English. This greatly helps them. In the end, she starts to be open to living there, forever. The conflicts in this book are very important as they are what cause all of the good things to happen to Ha. For example, one conflict includes her annoyance with not having a culture and food similar to what she had in Vietnam. However, in the end, Mrs. Washington gets her real mango to eat. There are many scenarios like this in the book, and they are all great moments for Ha and her family.

In comparing the verse novels *Little Green* and *Inside Out and Back Again*, it is important to consider whether or not the protagonist is right for poetry. In the book, *Little Green*, the protagonist is definitely right for poetry. This story is in first person and contains many secrets about Little Green. As the world she lives in does not allow for free speech, Little Green gives us an insight into her world that I do not believe possible in prose. One part of the novel that shows this is here, "When I went home, Nainai was cooking in the kitchen./The air was filled with the scent of stewed pork/and stir-fried vegetables./I told her the story from school,/and asked her,/Why were the landlords so bad?/She didn't answer my question for a while;/instead she put a few pieces of pork/on a small dish for me to have before the meal./She said,/In the old time the poor did suffer a lot,/but some rich people were nice too,/helped poor people without asking anything back./I was surprised by her answer./From the stories told in school,/I couldn't picture a good rich person./It would have been called/feudalistic backward thinking in school./But I knew my Nainai would not lie to me,/although I should not repeat what she had just said (77)." This quote shows that protagonist is right for poetry because of the deep connection to the mind. I feel like this passage, in prose, would not give me the same look into Little Green's mind. It would be similar, but not the same.

In the book *Inside Out and Back Again*, the protagonist is slightly good for poetry. I myself couldn't come to a clear consensus, as she is a very complex character, as most are in verse novels. **Although**, I feel like she could be portrayed in prose in a similar way. One part of the story that shows this is here, "I, the youngest,/get to celebrate/my actual birthday/even though I turned/a year older/like everyone else/at Tet. I, the only daughter,/usually get roasted chicken,/dried bamboo soup,/and all-I-can-eat pudding (26)." In these lines, you can see that while Ha is a very special character, whose thoughts fit well into poetry, I think that if this story was written in prose, there would be little to no noticeable difference. In verse novels, there is usually something very special about the narrator. While I believe Ha is special, her perspective isn't overly different, or unique to me as a reader.

**When** comparing these two novels, there are many similarities and many differences. One similarity includes how they are both fairly young children, meaning that their characters act in similar ways. For example, they can both be slightly selfish. In *Inside Out and Back Again*, Ha breaks a tradition simply because she felt like it. In *Little Green*, Little Green also has some selfish moments. However, with Little Green, because she truly is so little, she makes some mistakes, such as when she found something in her grandmother's closet and broke it.

In comparing these two books, there are also some differences. For one, Ha stays around the age of ten throughout the entire book. Little Green starts the book around her birth and ends it at age 10. They are also very different people in very different time periods. Ha, being in the 1970's traveling from Vietnam to America had to deal with culture shock, and not fitting in. Little Green had to deal with constant oppression and change in her young life. As such, they both reacted differently to events that occurred during the book. I, as a reader, also noticed that the author of Little Green gave the reader an inside view into Little Green's mind. *Inside and Out and Back Again*, this wasn't as present.

In regards to whether or not I feel like these characters are right for poetry, I think that Little Green is a great protagonist that fits very well into poetry. She is simply perfect for it. Because of the ever-changing world around her and all of the confusion and ideology, I feel like if this book was not a verse novel, it would simply not be the same. As for Ha, I feel like while she was a great character, she could've been portrayed just as well in prose as in verse, if not better.

In addition to considering whether or not the protagonist is right for poetry when understanding the similarities and differences between *Little Green* and *Inside Out and Back Again*, it is also important to consider if the individual poems of the book can stand on their own. Here are two poems from *Little Green*:

"I started school in the autumn./After the class saluted the picture of Chairman Mao,/the teacher sat us down at our desks and stools./Then we learned the following together./"Ten Thousand Years Chairman Mao! Ten Thousand Years the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution!"/We were also taught:/cabbage, radish, and one plus two;/singing, dancing,/and drawing pictures (61).

"The whole country became a big mourning hall;/wherever there were people, there was crying./We were summoned back to school/immediately after Chairman Mao died./There were no classes./Teachers were crying, students were crying./This went on for days./Sometimes it was unclear to me what I was crying for./I had only seen Chairman Mao's pictures and statues,/but I guess it was supposed to be sad/that he didn't live for ten thousand years,/and people who knew him/would never be able to see him again./Then I thought of my nainai and taitai:/Image if this dying happened to one of them./I would never see them again,/just like I never saw my taiye again after he died./Life is strange. I have no control over it!/The thoughts made me very sad,/and I cried for a long time after that./But then I ran out of reasons to cry again,/while some others were still crying./I started to worry,/wondering if they had deeper feelings/for Chairman Mao than I did."

Here are two poems from *Inside Out and Back Again*:

"At the port/we find out/there's no such thing/as a secret/among the Vietnamese./Thousands/found out/about the navy ships/ready to abandon the navy./Uncle Son flares elbows into wings,/lunges forward,/protecting his children./But our family sticks together like wet pages./I see nothing but backs/sour and sweaty./Brother Vu steps up,/placing Mother in front of him/and lifting me/onto his shoulders./His palms press/Brothers Quang and Khoi/forward./I promise myself/to never again/make fun of/Bruce Lee (61-62)."

"I wish/Brother Khoi wouldn't/keep inside/how he endures/the hours in school,/that mother wouldn't/hide her bleeding fingers,/that Brother Quang wouldn't/be so angry after work./I

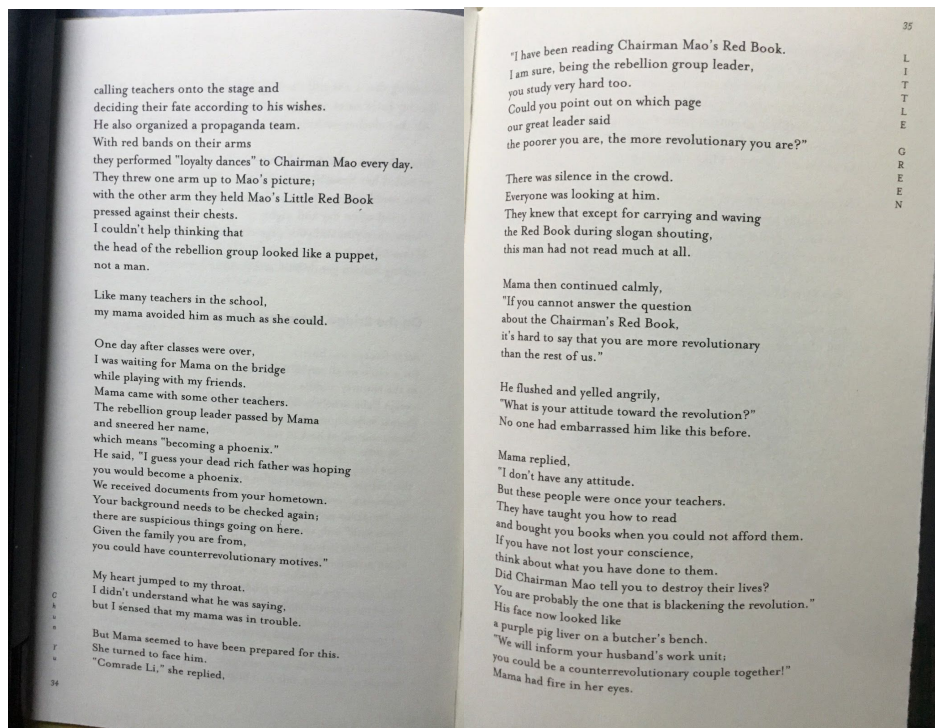
wish/our cowboy could be persuaded/to buy a horse,/that I could be invisible/until I can talk back,/that English could be learned/without so many rules./I wish/Father would appear/in my class/speaking beautiful English/as he does French and Chinese/and hold out his hand/for mine./Mostly/I wish/I were/still/smart (158-159).”

In comparing two verse whether or not the individual poems of these books can stand on their own, it is important to discuss the similarities. These books are similar in these regards because all of their poems can stand on their own. I like to think of a verse novel as a puzzle in which the pieces being the individual poems. A good poet can make all of their pieces make sense in any order by implanting meaning in every single poem. A novel is not a verse novel unless this is the case. In these two books, all of the poems tell a story. They all work together to tell a story. However, they should be able to stand on their own. And they do. There were some gaps, but they could all act as individual poems.

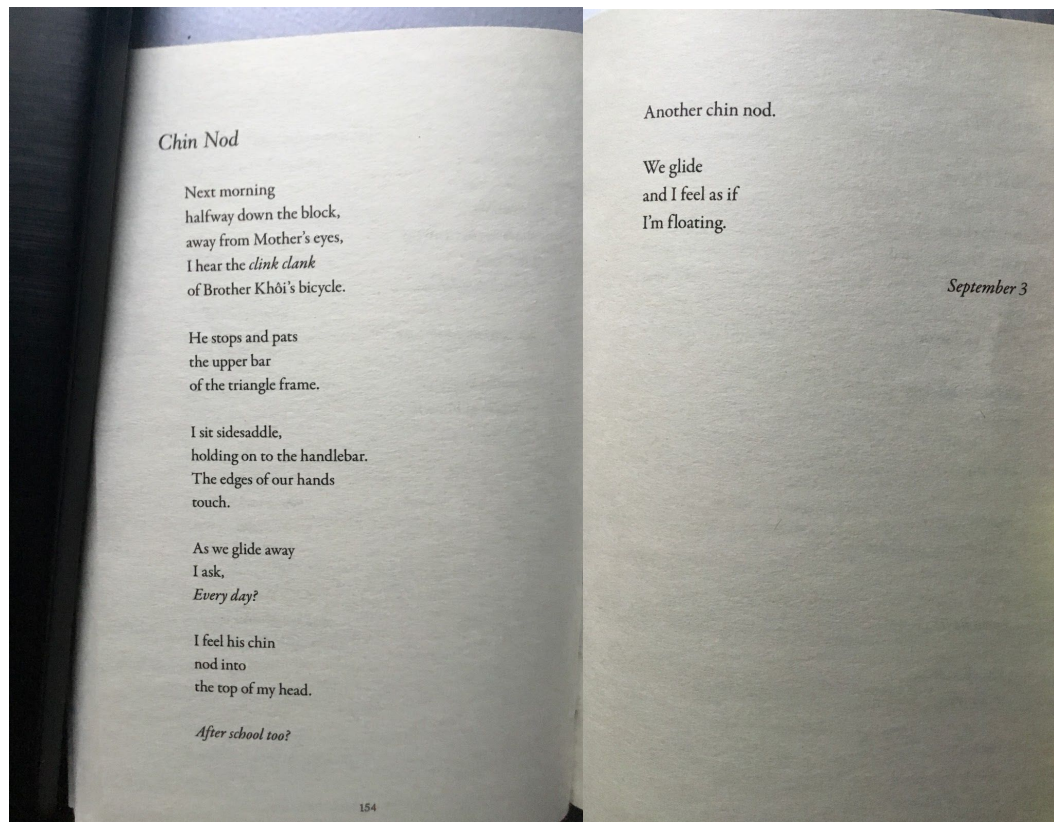
It is also important to discuss the differences. These two books are formatted very differently. In *Little Green*, the poems tend to be longer and contain more meaning. In *In and Out and Back Again*, the poems tend to be shorter, even though the book itself is longer. This produces a very noticeable difference when comparing if the poems can stand on their own simply because you can fit more information in a longer poem.

Therefore, I believe that *Little Green's* poems are better at standing on their own than the poems from *In and Out and Back Again* because they simply have more information in each, thus, they stand on their own better. Each poem in *Little Green* references past events, and because the book spans out over years, each poem contributes to the whole in a different way than in *Inside Out and Back Again*, which brought me to my conclusion.

Finally, it is also important to understand how the poem looks on the page when comparing these two verse novels. Here is a picture of a poem from *Little Green*:



Here is a poem from *Inside Out and Back Again*:



In discussing how the poems look on the page in these two verse novels, it is important to address the similarities. These are both similar because they both have line breaks that are unique, as you can see in the images above. The line breaks are interesting, but they aren't anything new. They both have fairly short lines.

It is also important to discuss the differences between these books. While these are fairly similar, there are many differences. For one, the lines in *Inside and Out and Back Again* are much shorter than in *Little Green*. This may be because *Little Green* has more extended thoughts, or it could be for aesthetics. The poems in *Inside Out and Back Again* also seem to be considerably shorter than in *Little Green*.

Therefore, I prefer how each poem from *Little Green* looks than the poems from *Inside Out and Back Again*. I feel this was because the poems in *Inside and Out and Back Again* appear (to me) to be a little repetitive in their form, as in they all kind of look very similar. In *Little Green*, while this problem was not excluded, I felt like the poet did a better job at formatting her poems.

Until this year, I was not aware of the existence of verse novels. I didn't know that you could tell a story with only poems. This year, when I started by reading *Little Green*, I was astonished as to how much I enjoyed reading it, even though it was told with just poems. Therefore, I believe that verse novels are essential to telling some stories. As I stated in the

begging, *Little Green* and *Inside Out and Back Again* are books that could not have been told in prose, a word which here means the ordinary, or normal, form of a book, with no poetic structure. If these stories were not told in verse, they wouldn't feel complete; something would be "off". Thus, verse novels symbolize peace and knowledge as poems can embody anything you want them to, and verse novels require a bit of extra thinking because of their complex structure. This is what makes verse novels unique, and which is why the world needs them now more than ever. To read poetry is an act of peace and tranquility, no matter what the subject. There is just something about it that's different than regular books, which is why I feel like verse novels are unique. They change your take on the world, which is why we need them now more than ever.

In conclusion, when comparing these two verse novels and trying to determine the better verse novel, one should be asking eight questions, three of which I asked today, "Is the protagonist "right" for poetry?", "Can the individual poems stand on their own?", and, "Do the poems work visually on the page?" Based on the details I have presented, I believe that *Little Green* did a better job at meeting these criteria because *Little Green* is a more unique character, the poems make more sense on their own, and the lines are more unique and special. **However**, my opinion doesn't matter. **Comparing** these books only gives the similarities and differences. It's up to you when deciding which one you prefer. In a world of different tastes and likings, that's all that matters.

#### Citations:

##### ***Little Green:***

Yu, Chun. *Little Green*. Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2005. Print.

##### ***Inside Out and Back Again:***

Lai, Thanhha. *Inside Out and Back Again*. Harpercollins Childrens, 2011. Print.