

EARTH CAKES AND SKY CAKES



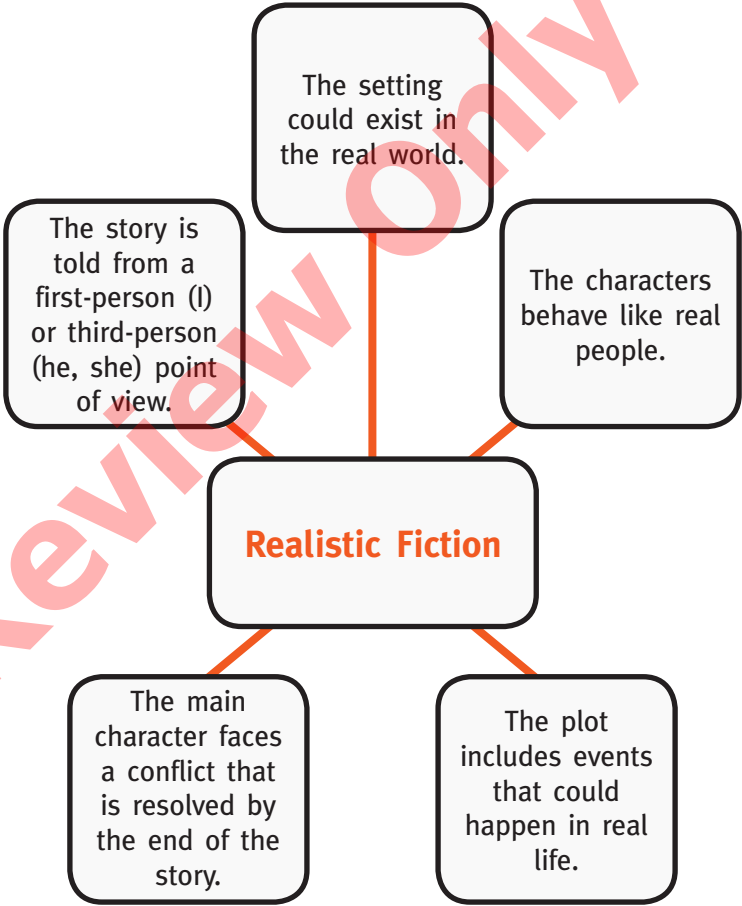
REALISTIC FICTION
LITERATURE

Level **R/40**
Lexile® **820L**

The folktale retold in this book is from Vietnam.

Realistic Fiction

Look for the genre features noted below as you read this book. Use the features to help you understand the text.



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“I HATE TẾT!”

O o o o o o o ...

It was the sound of a rooster, followed by the chirping of birds, the cooing of hens, and the barking of dogs.

“Be quiet!” Hoa pressed one ear into the pillow and covered the other ear with her winter blanket.

The bamboo bed creaked under her.

She winced. She couldn’t believe she was back in her father’s village.

Her parents had brought her here last night, away from Hanoi, away from her friends, away from her soft bed.

They were going to spend ten days here celebrating the Lunar New Year, Tết, with her grandparents.

Ten days! she thought. *What could she do here?*

She reached for her tablet. Perhaps her friends had posted something interesting in their chat group. No Internet!

“I hate Tết!” Hoa kicked the blanket away.

Of course there was no Internet here. Her grandparents had never touched a computer, nor had they ever owned one.

Turning sideways, she saw her father sleeping in the bed next to hers. Her mother's side of the bed was empty.

She hoped her parents hadn't argued again. Yesterday in the car, they had blamed each other for failing to prepare for Tết. They'd been so busy at work that they hadn't had time to buy gifts for relatives.

Hoa couldn't recall the last time she'd seen her parents laugh. And she couldn't recall the last time she'd laughed with them.



No one was in her grandparents' living room.

On a tall bamboo table were two heaping plates of fruits. Sticks of incense smoldered, sending fragrance up in the air, inviting the spirits of the ancestors to come home and enjoy these offerings.

Shivering in her winter jacket, Hoa walked across the brick yard and stood outside the kitchen door.



Her mother and grandma were on the earthen floor, feeding the burning stove with rice straw. This was how they cooked breakfast in the countryside.

Hoa wanted to stamp her feet and tell her mother she couldn't sleep because of the roosters and because the bed was hard. She wanted to go back home.

Suddenly, Hoa heard someone singing.

Stepping over clumps of grass soaked in morning dew, she entered the garden. Among tall plants, her grandpa was singing. His hair was a white flower among the large, green leaves.

He looked up. “Aren't these *lá dong* leaves beautiful?”

The leaves felt smooth and strong under Hoa's fingers. Each leaf was nearly as long as her arm and half as wide.

“They're perfect for making earth cakes!” Her grandpa smiled.

“Earth cakes?” Hoa licked her lips. The only good things about Tết were that she would get to eat earth cakes and that she would receive red envelopes filled with money.

“And those leaves are for sky cakes,” said her grandpa, pointing up at the tall banana tree.

Hoa liked sky cakes, too.

Hoa's grandpa picked a golden banana and gave it to her. "When I was your age, I always looked forward to making earth cakes and sky cakes with my parents. It was my favorite Tết tradition."

Tết traditions? Hoa thought. She knew plenty of them: She must wear her best clothes and visit her relatives because she had to show respect for older people. She must not sweep the floor, or cry, or shout during the entire first day of the new year, because this would bring bad luck.



During Tết, her grandparents and parents always placed earth cakes and sky cakes on the tall bamboo table and burned incense for the ancestors, but she didn't know why.

Hoa sank her teeth into the sweet banana. Sitting on a bamboo bench, she stared at the *lá dong* leaves. They seemed to hold secrets inside them.

“Grandpa, why do we offer earth cakes and sky cakes to the ancestors during Tết?” asked Hoa.

“Your parents never told you the ancient tale?”

Hoa shook her head.

“Well, there are many versions of the earth cake and sky cake tale, but my parents had their own.”

“Do you still remember it, Grandpa?”

“Of course I do. This is how my parents would begin: Once upon a time in our land lived King Hùng Vương the Sixth. He'd defeated foreign invaders and built a strong country with happy citizens. Because he was getting old, the king needed to find a successor among his twenty sons. He wanted to choose a person who was most worthy and not simply pass the throne on to the eldest son.”

THE TALE OF EARTH CAKES AND SKY CAKES

“Three months before Tết, the king summoned his sons. He told them that for Tết, each of them was to prepare a special dish to offer the ancestors.

“Almost all of the king’s sons were very rich and had many servants. They decided to prepare the most expensive and elaborate dishes. They sent their servants to the farthest corners of our country, searching for the most exotic ingredients.

“The eighteenth child of the king was the only one who wasn’t wealthy. His name was Lang Liêu. His mother had died young. Lang Liêu earned his living as a farmer. Unlike his half-siblings, Lang Liêu couldn’t afford to search far and wide for the ingredients for his dish.

“Lang Liêu didn’t want to be king, but he wanted to please his father, who had dedicated his life to making the people of his country happy. If Lang Liêu could meet his father’s challenge, he would get to spend more time with him and learn from him.

“Lang Liêu also wanted to show respect for his mother and his other ancestors with his offering. But he didn’t know how.

“He took a long walk around his fields and farm. All he could see were the things he had planted or raised himself. Such ordinary things! The king would certainly not like them.

