Summary

Cynthia Kadohata's *Half a World Away* is a complex and emotionally-charged work of incredibly realistic fiction. Weaving together themes of family, adoption, truth, and love, the story challenges readers to consider major ethical questions as they learn about protagonist Jaden's struggles with change and self-discovery.

Adopted from a Romanian group home at the age of 8, Jaden has never truly felt a part of his so-called family. Though his parents show him love and care for him, he struggles greatly with strong emotions and dangerous habits that he doesn't completely understand – causing him to feel that he doesn't truly belong in his family. Having been abandoned by his mother at a young age, he fears that something is wrong with him – something that will make history repeat itself, leading his family to eventually cast him out as well.

Jaden's challenges come to the forefront of his consciousness during a family trip to Kazakhstan, where they are to adopt baby Bahytzan from an orphanage in the southern city of
Kyrgyzlarda. While Jaden enjoys the almost unreal quality of his experiences in Kyrgyzlarda, his parents deal with strong emotions as they struggle to bond with the new member of their family – leaving Jaden emotionally out of the loop, as he can't seem to be able to engage emotionally with anyone, especially not his parents or their new baby. And he can't escape the nagging feeling that the new child is meant as a do-over, thanks to the parenting obstacles that he has presented.

*Half a World Away* is a powerful story of astounding depth. Readers ages 10 and older can gain insight into the complexity of human psychology and the power of experience in human development.

### Critical Thinking Questions

These Critical Thinking Questions are intended to help readers process and reflect on what they have read. The questions focus little on the who, what, when, where, and why of the story, and are centered around the portions of the story that meant to make readers think deeply and take critical consideration of Jaden's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The questions are listed in an order that follows the chronology of the story, but some of the questions can be considered again and again throughout the book, as readers' answers and perceptions of the characters may change as the story develops.

- Why does Jaden call his parents “mom” and “dad” to their faces, but by their first names in his mind?
- What does Jaden hoard? Why do you think he does this?
- Explain Jaden's intense hunger. Why does he have such a strong need to eat?
- Why do you think Jaden is so fascinated by electricity?
- What is the importance of Jaden's quilt? What does his treatment of it symbolize?
- What are Jaden's family's concerns about adopting a child with special needs? How do you think this makes Jaden feel?
What need do you think Jaden satisfies through his aggressive running? Where do you think the motivation comes from?

What does Jaden hoard? Why do you think he does this?

Why do you think Jaden isn't bothered by the rapid adoption decision that his parents are forced to make?

Sam and Jaden seem to be on the same wavelength. Describe their connection. Where do you think its roots lie?

Do you think it's fair for Penni and Steve to take Ramazan from his homeland? Explain.

How might Ramazan's adoption experience compare and contrast to Jaden's?

What does Jaden learn from Dimash?


What does Sam mean when he tells Jaden that he too will need to find something that “makes him fast”?

What needs does Jaden need to have met in order to become a more balanced and functional being? In what ways does he attempt to satisfy these needs for himself?

What important lessons does Jaden learn in the story? How do these lessons lead to change?

Mini-Lesson

Designed for use with readers ages 10-13, this mini-lesson intertwines mapmaking skills with the mapping of personal journeys in the form of growth. Intended to support readers in putting Jaden's travels into context and in processing the growth and change that Jaden experiences in the story, the mini-lesson will help readers to deepen their understanding of the story as a whole. The project could
be done as a whole group task, in small groups, with partners, or independently, depending on the skills of the readers involved and the amount of work time available. This project could be done over a course of many days, or in one day, but will require at least 3 hours of work time.

Physical and Spiritual Mapmaking

1. Explain to readers that they will be creating visual representations of Jaden's physical and spiritual journey, matching his challenges, personal growth, and lessons learned with the physical places and spaces in which they take place.

2. Ask readers to identify important places and spaces mentioned within the story, in chronological order if possible. Keep track of the ideas shared on a chalk board or piece of chart paper. Leave space on the right hand side of the board or paper so that a second list can be created.

3. Next, ask readers to identify Jaden's struggles, moments of growth, and specific lessons learned. Try to keep these in chronological order, too. Track these on the same board or paper where you've noted the physical spaces within the story.

4. With readers' help, draw lines to connect the physical locations mentioned to the lessons, challenges, and growth mentioned on the right-hand side of the list. You may find that some locations connect to multiple lessons, challenges, and moments of growth, or vice versa. If there are locations or lessons, challenges, and/or growth to connect to many or almost all of the items on the opposite list, work to narrow the connections down so that only the most significant of them are highlighted.

5. Using Google maps, track Jaden's travels, beginning with his original home in Romania, then from Chicago to Germany, and on to multiple locations in Kazakhstan. It will be impossible to map these locations without using a world map; rather than drawing lines on a real map, think creatively about how to represent these locations and their
proximity to each other without simply drawing over a preexisting representation of the earth. Perhaps locations could be represented through drawings of the landscape and/or cityscape that make them unique, and placed on a large poster paper in a way that echoes their true proximity to each other. Alongside each location, add a short synopsis (with words, or a combination of words and images) of the important moments that take place here. In order to effectively depict the locations to which Jaden travels, readers will need to do research to find out what each place is like culturally and what it looks like.

6. Alongside the physical locations shown on the map, add information about the spiritual portion of Jaden's journey that takes place in each location. Think about images that can represent the growth that takes place during each step of his journey: perhaps baby pictures can represent his childhood or the new members of his family, or specific foods could represent the feelings that he attempts to quell in specific places. Think about not only literal representations of these things, but symbolic representations, too.

**Extension Activities**

Each of the following activity suggestions are designed to support readers in not only deepening their understanding of this particular story, but in strengthening their skills in connecting what they've read to the world around them. Loosely written so as to allow for adaptability, the activities have been designed with readers ages 10-13 in mind.

*Adopting Across Borders*

International adoption is a complex topic. Depending on where children are adopted from, the politics surrounding the circumstances through which they are orphaned can be incredibly complicated. However, not all international adoption is like Jaden's experience: while adoptable children in some
places experience poor quality of life and have high rates of health, cognitive, or developmental issues, adoptable children in other places experience much more hospitable conditions and are able to have a higher quality of life. Often, the circumstances in which adoptable children exist are the result of regional, national, and/or international politics – either currently, or as a residual effect of past events.

Readers can work to understand the circumstances through which adoptable children are made available to families here in the United States by researching international adoption. Readers who know people who have adopted internationally (or been adopted internationally) can gain valuable information from those who have firsthand experience with it. Readers should be sure to enter such a study without the assumption that all adoptable children worldwide live in situations like Ramazan, Dimash, and Jaden experienced; however, they should be prepared to encounter challenging information.

**Satisfying Human Needs**

Psychologist Abraham Maslow theorized that though humans have many needs, they are prioritized according to importance. Maslow's theory of human needs is arranged in a hierarchy – Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. According to the hierarchy, the most basic of human needs (food, shelter, water, safety) need to be met in order for the next set of needs to be met – and so on. Essentially, Maslow theorized that humans cannot meet their most complex, emotionally-based needs without first meeting their most basic physical and physiological needs.

Maslow also believed that humans sometimes attempt to fulfill their own needs when they are not met by those around them. In the story, Jaden engages in some behaviors that could serve as attempts to meet some of his essential needs. Research Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and apply it to Jaden. What needs has he had met? What needs still need to be met for Jaden? Which of his behaviors could be attempts to fulfill unmet needs?

Afterward, apply it to your own life. How do you act when one (or more) of your needs can't be
met? In what ways do you experience struggle or challenge as a result? What do you do in order to try to have your needs met?

_Eagle Hunting_

Eagle hunting, as shown to Jaden by Sam, is an important Kazakh tradition with great symbolism. For Jaden, the practice comes to symbolize his need for drive, direction, and passion in life; within Kazakh culture, it is all of this and more. Research the history of eagle hunting in Central Asia, and learn about its place within the culture of rural Kazakhstan. How has the practice evolved over time? What Kazakh cultural beliefs does the practice connect to and/or symbolize? Why did the practice begin?