

# A Wish in the Dark

## CHRISTINA SOONTORNVAT



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Also available as an e-book and in audio

### About the Book

All light in Chattana is created by one man—the Governor, who appeared after the Great Fire to bring peace and order to the city. For Pong, who was born in a prison, the magical lights represent freedom, and he dreams of the day he will be able to walk among them. But when Pong escapes from prison, he realizes that the world outside is no fairer than the one behind bars, and worst of all, his prison tattoo marks him as a fugitive who can never be free. Meanwhile, Nok, the prison warden’s perfect daughter, is determined to track down Pong to restore her family’s good name. But like Pong, she discovers realities and secrets that shake her core beliefs. Set in a Thai-inspired fantasy world, Christina Soontornvat’s twist on Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* is a dazzling, fast-paced adventure that explores the difference between law and justice—and asks whether one child can shine a light in the dark.

### About the Author

Christina Soontornvat grew up in a small Texas town, where she spent many childhood days behind the counter of her parents’ Thai restaurant with her nose in a book. Christine has a BS in mechanical engineering and a master’s degree in science education and spent a decade working in the science museum field. She now lives in Austin, Texas, with her husband and two children.

### Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.



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## Discussion Questions

1. “A monster of a mango tree” is introduced on the first page of the book. How is it significant? What part does it play in the story?
2. Pong and Somkit are best friends but are very different. How do they differ as young boys in prison? As young men at the end of the book?
3. On pages 7 and 8, Pong and Somkit debate the merits of standing up for what is right versus protecting oneself. Pong thinks it was worthwhile to fight for the mango that should have been theirs, whereas Somkit says, “Sometimes you have to go along with things if you don’t want to get mashed into a pulp.” Which point of view do you agree with? Why?
4. “Trees drop their fruit straight down” is a proverb that appears first on page 14. What does this mean? Do you think it’s true?
5. The Governor of Chattana says, “Light shines only on the worthy” (page 23). What does he mean by that, both literally and metaphorically?
6. All prisoners in Chattana were tattooed on their wrist with the name of their prison. How did his tattoo affect Pong’s life?
7. After Pong escapes from the prison, he meets Father Cham at the Buddhist monastery. Father Cham becomes many things to Pong: parent, teacher, spiritual leader. Describe Father Cham’s teaching style. What does Pong learn from him?
8. Soon after Pong meets Father Cham, the monk ties one length of string after another around Pong’s wrists, each time reciting a blessing. The blessings are oddly specific, such as “May you never step in a snake’s nest,” or “May you never get food poisoning from raw chicken” (page 57). What did you think when you read these blessings?
9. Father Cham repeats often to Pong, “You have a good heart.” But Pong is not sure he does. What makes him unable to believe this?
10. We meet Nok Sivapan, the prison warden’s daughter, several times throughout the book. What is she like at the beginning? How does she change?
11. On pages 83–85, we learn that Nok’s family has a secret that concerns something shameful in Nok’s past. What did you think it might be?
12. On page 93, Pong questions why Father Cham wishes for the baby to walk in peace. He wonders why Father Cham didn’t bless her with wealth or a long life instead. Which of those three blessings (wealth, long life, or walking in peace) would you most want, and why?
13. Father Cham gives Pong a final blessing: “My wish for you is that you find what you are looking for” (page 111). What does Pong think he means by this? What do you think Father Cham meant?
14. Light is one of the main subjects of this book: the magic orbs, the different colored lights that are priced according to their brightness, the light that flows from certain people’s fingers, and even inner light. Nok learns to use the light that is deep inside her to win at spire fighting. What do you think this inner light is?
15. Both Father Cham and Ampai, the woman who organizes the resistance to the Governor, are elders who guide the younger people who live with them. How are they alike? How are they different?
16. Ampai says, “It’s the law, but it isn’t what’s *right*” (page 212). How do these two things, the law and what is right, differ? Can you think of laws that don’t seem right to you?
17. The Governor says, “It was my destiny to bring Chattana back to the light. Every day since that first day has been a struggle to keep order, to keep the darkness at bay. Not just the darkness of the night, but the darkness in people’s own hearts. But it has all been worth it. Forty years later, there have been no fires, no wars, no disasters” (page 258). How has he accomplished this? What kind of man is the Governor?
18. When Father Cham appears to Pong in a vision, he helps Pong clarify what it is he seeks. Pong first thinks it is freedom, but then sees that is only half the answer. He finally realizes, “You can’t run away from darkness. It’s everywhere. The only way to see through it is to shine a light” (page 324). What does this mean? Do you agree?



## Discussion Questions

19. Nok remembers a conversation with her father when they discussed the differences between the lives of people on the East Side and the West Side. He told her, "Sometimes light shines on the worthy. But sometimes it just shines on the lucky ones" (page 242). What do you think Nok's father meant by that? How does luck or privilege affect the lives of the people who live on the West Side?
20. On the day of the march, there are a lot of ominous happenings, including the arrival of many police armed with long wooden staffs. "Behind them, Nok saw the shutters of the West Side windows swinging closed, one after another, shutting off all that pretty Gold light. Whatever happened on the bridge tonight, the people on the West Side didn't want to see it" (page 342). Why did they not want to see what happened?
21. After the Governor is gone, the people feel a little lost since there is no longer anyone telling them what to do. The author asks, "Which was better: being safe or having freedom? And did you have to choose?" (page 372). How would you answer this?

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These questions were prepared by Grace Worcester Greene, who has served on the Caldecott Committee, the Newbery Committee, the *Boston Globe-Horn Book* Award Committee, and most recently as a juror for the National Book Award for Young People's Literature. She is a former youth service consultant for the Vermont Department of Libraries.

