



# The Sympathizer

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## **The Sympathizer** Viet Thanh Nguyen

Winner of the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, *The Sympathizer* is a Vietnam War novel unlike any other. The narrator, one of the most arresting of recent fiction, is a man of two minds and divided loyalties, a half-French half-Vietnamese communist sleeper agent living in America after the end of the war.

It is April 1975, and Saigon is in chaos. At his villa, a general of the South Vietnamese army is drinking whiskey and, with the help of his trusted captain, drawing up a list of those who will be given passage aboard the last flights out of the country. But, unbeknownst to the general, this captain is an undercover operative for the communists, who instruct him to add his own name to the list and accompany the general to America. As the general and his compatriots start a new life in Los Angeles, the captain continues to observe the group, sending coded letters to an old friend who is now a higher-up within the communist administration. Under suspicion, the captain is forced to contemplate terrible acts in order to remain undetected. And when he falls in love, he finds that his lofty ideals clash violently with his loyalties to the people close to him, a contradiction that may prove unresolvable.

A gripping spy novel, a moving story of love and friendship, and a layered portrayal of a young man drawn into extreme politics, *The Sympathizer* examines the legacy of the Vietnam War in literature, film, and the wars we fight today.

## **The Sympathizer Details**

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Author : Viet Thanh Nguyen

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# From Reader Review The Sympathizer for online ebook

## Diane S ? says

Pulitzer Prize winner and I don't always agree, and such is the case here. A very worthy book, a book with so many truisms, such as this one "booted hard by the irony of how revolution fought for independence and freedom could make those things worth less than nothing." The tone is ironic, often satirical but it gets to be too much, wearing on me as I was reading. Almost became a chore to shift through some of this to get to the parts that meant something to me.

I little remember the Vietnam War, was very young but do remember the scenes on TV and the protests all over the United States. So in this way the book did succeed by showing me many of the things I didn't know. There are brilliant phrases, insights but in between were things I just wasn't interested in, that in a way felt like it was taking away from the story. Though in retrospect I can see where it all ties together, what it means, but while reading it just felt frustrating. There is one event I found shocking, interesting, comes near the end of the book but again I felt this was overplayed, went on too long.

So a very mixed read for me, intellectually I can see why it won, but emotionally I wasn't sold. The absurdities of war and we keep going round and round, never learning a thing, or so it seems. Buddy read with Angela and Esil, which definitely made this easier to bear, would probably never had finished if it hadn't been for them.

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## Ron Charles says

Forty years ago this month, after a long, deadly release of flatulence from American politicians, the United States evacuated its personnel from Saigon in an operation appropriately code-named Frequent Wind. Whether you were alive then or not, the images of those panicked Vietnamese crushing the U.S. Embassy are tattooed on our collective consciousness.

In the opening pages of Viet Thanh Nguyen's extraordinary first novel, "The Sympathizer," that terror feels so real that you'll mistake your beating heart for helicopter blades thumping the air. Nguyen brings us right inside the barbed-wire-encircled home of a South Vietnamese general just waking from his faith in American resilience. Thrashing all around him, officers and cronies are bargaining for survival: Who will get out? Who will. . . .

*To read the rest of this review, go to The Washington Post:*  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>

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## Adina says

*I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds.*

With these words Viet Thanh Nguyen decides to start the novel and these two sentences were enough to get

me hooked. They managed to intrigue me, to want to know more and set the basis for what will prove to be one of the main theme, the interior conflict of the narrator.

The Symphatizer is a book about the Vietnam War and its aftermath. The book is about loyalty, identity and the difficulty to adjust to a new culture and reality. It written from the point of view of the Vietnamese and does not always put the Americans in a positive light.

This novel is a perfect companion to the Quiet American by Graham Green (a masterpiece ), the only other book about the Vietnam war that I read. Actually, the Quiet American is mentioned a couple of times in the Symphatizer. One theme that I found in both books is about the “innocent” and idealized intentions with which the Americans entered the Vietnam War and their failure to admit ant wrongdoing. *“They believe in a universe of divine justice where the human race is guilty of sin, but they also believe in a secular justice where human beings are presumed innocent. You can’t have both. You know how Americans deal with it? They pretend they are eternally innocent no matter how many times they lose their innocence. The problem is that those who insist on their innocence believe anything they do is just. At least we who believe in our own guilt know what dark things we can do.”* A similar idea I selected for my review of the Quiet American: *“Innocence is a kind of insanity” “Innocence always calls mutely for protection when we would be so much wiser to guard ourselves against it: innocence is like a dumb leper who has lost his bell, wandering the world, meaning no harm.”*

The novel kept me on the edge of the seat for the first 100 pages or so when the fall of Saigon is described and thorough the escape to USA of the main characters. When the setting moves to Los Angeles the pace slows down and my interest begins to gradually fall culminating with the making of the movie in Thailand. Those chapters were excruciatingly slow and the smart writing barely managed to make the experience bearable. My interest picked up after that and the last 20% of the book were as good as the beginning. I do not want to say too much about that except that it was the most disturbing part of the novel.

The book is cleverly written, I loved the author’s way with words. I did not expect to find humor among these pages, even less one similar to Vonnegut’s ( a realization I had while reading another review). I noticed a particularity of the writing style that I want to share with you. The author uses a lot of sexual metaphors when describing war scenes. Here are two examples: *“stubby grenades resembling short, metallic dildos”* and *“a parachute flare sputtering into spermatizing existence”* . I wonder what the meaning behind them is. Is it because war, as sex is about power, control, performance and status? Is it because the two acts dehumanize us to some extent?

In the end I also want to let you all know that I will never look at a squid the same way ever again. The ones that read the novel know why.

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## Duy Nguyen says

Being an English major from UC Berkeley and an Artistic Director of Asian American Theater Company for 3 years, I've run across a lot of Asian American works. Though my heart is always with these stories, they've often lacked style. Viet Nguyen has style. He's really funny, in a smart unpredictable way. And I think he's is going to get a lot of awards and all that when word really gets out. Deservedly so because it touches all the big points of Vietnamese American history while never getting bogged down in being a historical lesson. I can see backlash by Vietnamese conservatives who want us all to just be the kind of Vietnamese who do our

homework and forever hold a grudge against Communism. Definitely, not a read for the faint-hearted. I'd say this is the best book on the Vietnamese American experience period. And coming from a Vietnamese American who was actually a boat refugee, this is the most authentic (yea, it's spy genre, but we're talking how Vietnamese people actually think and survive) telling of the Vietnam to America experience. I'm buying this as a gift for all the cool people in my family.

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## **Philip says**

4.5ish stars.

At times hilarious, at others disturbing, and sometimes both at once, this is a story about war, identity, friendship, loyalty and understanding.

I'll admit to not having the most extensive understanding of the Vietnam War. It was before my time and if I was ever taught about it in school (I'm sure it had to have come up at some point, right?) it's lost on me now. My background knowledge basically comes from watching Apocalypse Now (which is the obvious inspiration for a movie in the novel to which our narrator lends his perspective) which is hardly an exhaustive resource. After reading, I feel like I can both sympathize with and condemn all of the parties involved in the War.

Our nameless narrator is a "man of two minds" continuously caught in the middle of several parties. He's half-Vietnamese, half-French, and American by assimilation although none of his countries accept him. Add to that his communist sympathies as a Vietnamese refugee in America, reporting on the goings-on to his superiors who are reading his hidden messages more closely than we realize. I've read plenty of stories where the hero is from multiple worlds without being fully accepted by any of them, but never done more masterfully than in this novel. As the narrator sympathizes with nearly everyone he meets, we can't help but sympathize with the tragedies he experiences, even the ones brought by his own hand.

There are shades of Kurt Vonnegut (particularly Mother Night) in the black humor and the clever use of language that is simultaneously profound, provocative, and comical. The author somehow finds a way to use a woman's cleavage as metaphor in such an insightful way it's a little bit embarrassing. He makes light of several events in ways that are just cringe-worthy (squid? coke bottle?) it's hard to read but even harder not to.

For a debut author, Viet Than Nguyen is astoundingly assured in his writing. His prose is beyond impressive. The pace is inconsistent and some parts felt like I was slogging through (except for in a few parts, this is hardly the thriller it claims to be) but overall an informative, beautifully written historical novel. Highly recommended.

Posted in Mr. Philip's Library

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## **Elyse says**

Another Update (2nd update)--- I've been reading through my Kindle book again the last few days of this

book --looking over my notes -taking new ones.--Our local book club is meeting to talk about "The Sympathizer". 25 of members from around the Bay Area are attending....with 25 others on the waitlist. For people who live in our area -- this is an important topic. Americans and Vietnamese/Americans live closely together here.

The Vietnamese culture thrives in our city. Right after I read this book -the first time -over a year ago -- before Viet won the Pulitzer Prize --I chatted with him....a few times actually. He lived here in San Jose for a period of his life--and still has relatives in San Jose.

What stands out for me -this second time -- (especially the parts in Los Angeles when things looked so awful to me in those grimy apartments -yet I couldn't help but laugh at some of the descriptions) -- was that Viet didn't write this book to point any fingers. He never 'blames' anyone - but we become more aware of the conflicts living in the minds of the Vietnamese 'just-being-here' after the war in Vietnam. And nobody gave us that experience more clearly than he has in any book I had read before.

Looking forward to what 24 other people have to say!

Update: exciting news.... This book just won the Pulitzer Prize for this year!!!!!!!!!!!!!! VERY EXCITING!!!! VERY Cool!!!!

The year is 1975 at the start. As communist tanks are about to roll into Saigon, a General of the Southern Vietnamese army is saying good-bye to community workers and friends from the Villa they live.

The General and his compatriots leave to start a new life in Los Angeles, Calif.

The Captain 'secretly' reports to a communist-allied -higher up - Viet Cong. about their group. Both secrecy and hierarchy were key to revolution ---which was why there was always another committee higher up!

The author's story gives voice -depth- anguish -and understanding of what its like to be Vietnamese in America after the war.

The narrator, \*The grizzled captain\*, brings us into his head so that in time, we, too, feel as if we have one foot in American and one foot in Vietnam.

....."Ah, the Amerasian, forever caught between worlds and never knowing where he belongs! Imagine if you did not suffer from the confusion you must constantly experience, feeling the constant tug-of-war inside you and over you, between Orient and Occident. 'East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet', as Kipling so accurately diagnosed".

There are enchanting growth experiences for our 'grizzled-captain' with woman! I especially loved how his eyes opened when he was falling in love with Lana: A modern thinking Vietnamese woman.

"She believed in gun control, birth control, liberation for homosexuals and civil rights for all; she believed in Ghandi, Martin Luthur King Jr., and Thich Nhat Hanh; she believed in nonviolence, and world peace, and yoga....."

"Most of all this woman expressed her opinions: whereas most Vietnamese woman kept their opinions to themselves until they were married, whereon they never kept their opinions to themselves, she was not hesitant to say what she thought."

This is a remarkable first novel. Its 'RICH & LIVELY'. Packed filled with stories -thrilling -thriller-funny & fierce! Its a novel which commands our compassion and respect for Vietnamese-Americans.

I've 'shifted' in 'soul' since reading this book. It gives me an entire new view of the ending of the Vietnam War. Bringing Vietnam and America together has been taking shape in front of my eyes for years -- but I hadn't examined the courage, suffering, heroism, and collaboration until now.

My emotional heart is permanently tattooed with love for the Vietnamese-Americans.

I share a city with a large population of Vietnamese-Americans.

I live in San Jose, California. We have more Vietnamese residents than any other city outside of Vietnam. Over 10% of our population is comprised with Vietnamese-American residents. Our city has Vietnamese language radio shows, TV shows, literature, community strip malls. (Vietnam Town). The San Jose City Council designated Vietnam Town as "Little Saigon". Most Vietnamese prefer the name Vietnam Town. We've wonderful services run by the Vietnamese: nail salons, acupuncture, clothing, furniture, jewelry, accounting, travel, medical, and wonderful restaurants,(Pho soup), etc.

This is a powerful book! Hard to believe it has not been written until now! Wonderful engaging storytelling by Viet Thanh Nguyen.

Thank you Grove Atlantic and Netgalley! Powerful Story!

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## **Perry says**

### **Powerful Personalization of Vietnamese and Vietnam War's Fallout** [*Winner of 2016 Pulitzer Prize in Literature*]

This novel profoundly personalized for me the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese in a way no movie or book has. It is written as the first person account of a South Vietnamese captain who was born a "bastard" to a Vietnamese mother who was seduced and impregnated by his father, a Catholic priest, who fails to recognize the captain as a son. The narrator/captain is a sympathizer to the communist overthrow of Vietnam (and reports certain activities in southern Calif. in the years after the overthrow), yet no one should get the impression that this tsunamic novel is in some way sympathetic to communism or communists. The idea crossed my mind before reading the book.

*Author Viet Thanh Nguyen, Assoc. Prof., USC*

Instead, this novel, full of levity and humor, is a substantial, captivating and intellectually stimulating novel that actualizes, in human terms, an indictment of the USA's treatment of the Vietnamese during and after the war (all here in the States) but it much more harshly denounces communism and the post-revolutionary communist leaders of Vietnam (asking, both implicitly and explicitly, what does the revolutionary do when the revolution triumphs?, and why do those who call for independence and freedom take away the independence and freedom of others?).

The *Animal Farm* will always stick with me on the evils of communism, particularly in Russia. Now *The Sympathizer* has scarred a slice of my soul with the devastating effects on a country and its countrymen of a

communist regime (and makes the point that many of the former revolutionaries saw the error *after it was too late*). Moreover, the book examines of the more general evils corrupting men/women in power, all ideas of government aside.

This novel brings to mind a quote I ran across about a year ago from an Argentine-Canadian man of letters named Alberto Manguel, who so poignantly stated about good literature:

Books may not change our suffering, books may not protect us from evil [or] tell us what is good or what is beautiful, and they will certainly not shield us from the common fate of the grave. But books grant us myriad possibilities: the possibility of change, the possibility of illumination.

This novel seems perfect for high school and college students studying the Vietnam War and the era surrounding it, particularly from the point of view of the Vietnamese.

A highest recommendation.

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## **Angela M says**

This is without a doubt an important story to tell. " ....thousands of refugees wailed as if attending a funeral, the burial of their nation, dead too soon, as so many were, at a tender twenty- one years of age." The writing is as good as I found in *The Refugees* but I wasn't immediately drawn in and had a difficult time trying to understand what was happening during the evacuation, but I'm guessing that it reflects the reality of what it must have been like. Our narrator, the Captain , a double agent, introduces the reader to his dual allegiance when he says " I am simply able to see any issue from both sides. I flatter myself that this is a talent..." I was reminded of the mixed feelings that people had about this war. I was very moved by some of the scenes. The old woman and others angry and grieving throwing their shoes . Also heartbreaking was how the Captain's friend Bon loses his wife and child. In addition to the chaos of the evacuation scene the gut wrenching torture scenes towards the end stands out in my mind as well.

The essay and an interview at the end of the book were also enlightening and so very relevant for the issues at hand today and gave me a better understanding of the novel. In the essay , the author says : "The tendency to separate war stories from immigrant stories means that most Americans don't understand how many of the immigrants and refugees in the United States have fled from wars - many of which this country has had a hand in." But he doesn't put the full blame there . In the interview, he says : " The Vietnamese are at least partially responsible for what they did to themselves. I didn't want to put the blame squarely on the Americans or the French, although that blame is there. I wanted this to be ver specifically a moment of Vietnamese-on-Vietnamese confrontation and responsibility because, again, this is in part how we claim our subjectivity: we aren't just victims but victimizers as well. This is a part of our history that we all find very hard to confront." These comments give the novel some perspective and I wish I had read them first.

The wonderful writing I found in *The Refugees* prompted me to read this book. If that wasn't reason enough, this was a buddy read with two of my very good Goodreads friends, Diane and Esil. However, I have very mixed feelings about the book. There were too few moments when I felt an emotional connection to the Captain and at times it was a struggle to continue reading. I wish I could articulate it in a better way, but there you have it . 3 stars and 3.5 stars after reading the essay and interview, but these were not the novel, so it remains 3 stars. It won the Pulitzer Prize and there are so many others who have rated it 5 stars, but it just



didn't get to me as much as The Refugees which I rated 5 stars.

Thanks , Diane and Esil! Let's do this again sometime.

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## **Melki says**

**My mother was native, my father was foreign, and strangers and acquaintances had enjoyed reminding me of this ever since my childhood, spitting on me and calling me bastard, although sometimes, for variety, they called me bastard before they spit on me.**

I didn't realize how much I've gotten used to not needing to pay attention to the books I read. Reading this one was as much a chore as it was a joy. Words, sentences, entire paragraphs that required, no . . . demanded I pay heed. Here was inexplicably lovely prose about ugly subject matter: prostitution, war, and war's aftermath.

**Now am I daring to accuse American strategic planners of deliberately eradicating peasant villages in order to smoke out the girls who would have little choice but to sexually service the same boys who bombed, shelled, strafed, torched, pillaged, or merely forcibly evacuated said villages? I am merely noting that the creation of native prostitutes to service foreign privates is an inevitable outcome of a war of occupation, one of those nasty little side effects of defending freedom that all the wives, sisters, girlfriends, mothers, pastors, and politicians in Smallville, USA, pretend to ignore behind waxed and buffed walls of teeth as they welcome their soldiers home, ready to treat any unmentionable afflictions with the penicillin of American goodness.**

It rarely takes me over two weeks to finish a book, but this one had to be poured over, and savored.

**What's crazy is living when there's no reason to live, he said. What am I living for? A life in our apartment? That's not a home. It's a jail cell without bars. All of us - we're all in jail cells without bars. We're not men anymore. Not after the Americans fucked us twice and made our wives and kids watch. First the Americans said we'll save your yellow skins. Just do what we say. Fight our way, take our money, give us your women, then you'll be free. Things didn't work out that way, did they? Then after fucking us, they rescued us. They just didn't tell us they'd cut off our balls and cut out our tongues along the way. But you know what? If we were real men, we wouldn't have let them do that.**

Highly recommended - a tough, but worthwhile read.

**The war's over, Ms. Mori said. Don't they know that? I wanted to say something profound as I stood up to say goodnight. I wanted to impress Ms. Mori with the intellect she could never have again. Wars never die, I said. They just go to sleep.**

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## **Sr3yas says**

**The winner of the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.**

Usually, when I write my thoughts about a story, I look for a good quote as a lead in. Sometimes, it's hard to

find such a quote, whereas in other cases, I find myself having a luxury of choosing from as many as a dozen good quotes that I loved while reading the novel.

**But with Sympathizer, it's just plain crazy.** When I reached the last page of the novel, I looked back at the highlighted lines I saved, and I found myself with over EIGHTY different mesmerizing quotes. And at that moment, the intuition that I've read one of the well-crafted literature written was confirmed for me.

***“My weakness for sympathizing with others has much to do with my status as a bastard, which is not to say that being a bastard naturally predisposes one to sympathy. Many bastards behave like bastards.”***

The Sympathizer is our unnamed narrator, a US-educated non-combat South Vietnamese military man who is secretly a mole working for Vietcong. (*Helluva Resume, My dear unnamed narrator*). The story is the written confession of our leading man, penned for his jail keepers. His confession starts with the fall of Saigon in 1975, followed by his immigration to the USA with his commander who is a military General, his friend Bon and other escapees, all while acting as a spy and reporting to his friend in Vietcong.

***“Besides my conscience, my liver was the most abused part of the body.”***

In many novels, you can feel the author pulling the strings as the story switches characters, POVs or Inner monologues. But With Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel, there is not a single trace of outside influence. The story belongs to the narrator and him alone. This particular style truly made the events, emotions, characters, sentences.... everything complex and full of life.

***“I was in close quarters with some representative specimens of the most dangerous creature in the history of the world, the white man in a suit.”***

Sympathizer masterly handles a lot of fascinating themes: War, oriental representation, political chess games, and immigration, all while narrating them with a delightful black comedic tone. One of the best parts of the story is when our narrator is hired by a Hollywood director to act as an advisor for a Vietnam war-themed movie. The obvious representation of natives as mere plot devices by Hollywood movies (*Platoon, Apocalypse now, Full metal jacket*) was appropriately bashed at this point and it was glorious.

***“After all, nothing was more American than wielding a gun and committing oneself to die for freedom and independence, unless it was wielding that gun to take away someone else's freedom and independence.”***

I'm chopping one star off because of the last act, which reminded me of Sh?saku End?'s novel, Silence. It was a little too abstract for me, yet true implications of the finale are fascinating.

Overall, The Sympathizer's strength lies with its stunningly constructed sentences and its unique perspective that offers something entirely new. Undoubtedly, this is a story which deserves all the accolades it received.

***“Disarming an idealist was easy. One only needed to ask why the idealist was not on the front line of the***

*particular battle he had chosen.”*

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## **Esil says**

I loved *The Refugees*. I loved the writing and I loved Viet Thanh Nguyen's perspective on the experiences of Vietnamese refugees in the United States. So I was excited to read *The Sympathizer*, Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize winning novel. Unfortunately, I didn't love it in the way I loved *The Refugees*. I'm conflicted as to why:

-One of Thanh Nguyen's strengths is his incredible writing -- at times playful, often cutting elegantly to the heart of the matter and always strong and intelligent. For that reason alone, I would read anything he writes.

-One of Thanh Nguyen's other strengths is his insight into his characters and their mixed motivations. He is a master at brilliant moments of reflection.

-Having said this, at times *The Sympathizer* felt like too much work, almost like the cleverness got in the way of the story. Thanh Nguyen has created a very complex first person narrator who tells a complex shifting shifty story. The unnamed narrator comes to the United States amongst a group of Vietnamese refugees, but his allegiances still lie ostensibly with the Viet Cong in Vietnam. His story is one of conflicting allegiances and inner conflict. It's a fascinating topic, but somehow the delivery felt almost too clever. The narrative string pivoted relentlessly. It was a bit dizzying and sometimes felt like form was giving over to substance.

-There is an underlying sarcasm to the narration. It may reflect self-loathing or the emotional distance the narrator must keep from everyone in order to maintain his role as a "Sympathizer". This makes for clever prose, but it does create an emotional distance between reader and narrator. While there is a pretence that the narrator is bearing his soul, is he really? The last two chapters shift the ground a bit, but not enough to change the overall effect for me.

-My 3 star rating reflects my personal experience reading *The Sympathizer*. However, there were definitely many 5 star passages -- for example, instances when the narrator reflected on his childhood or his conflicted role that were truly brilliant.

Based on the writing alone, sign me up for Thanh Nguyen's future books. But *The Sympathizer* is definitely not for everyone.

Thank you to GR friends Diane and Angela for reading this one in sync with me. It was my first buddy read. It was a great experience, and certainly helpful to get your insights while not feeling alone in my struggles with this one.

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## **Roxane says**

So clever and witty but also gripping.

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## **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

I read this book for many reasons - Pulitzer winner, and a book club pick for my in-person group. We discussed it last night, and I wanted to wait to weigh in until that discussion, but also until I had finished reading the author's non-fiction book *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (on the long list for the National Book Award as we speak.)

When you read the two books back to back, it is easy to see how the eleven years of research that went into the non-fiction academic treatment of a book on war and memory also provided the natural breeding grounds for a biting novel about the Vietnam War. Or, should I clarify, the war we refer to as the Vietnam War, or even more often, just "Vietnam." And I need to clarify because Nguyen is writing this novel from the Vietnamese perspective, not necessarily catering to what white Americans want to hear. The author claims status as a forever refugee, a product of war, his entire life trajectory a result of having to leave his home as a child. (A curious person can learn even more about the author's perspective in this illuminating interview.)

In case it sounds like I am saying this is a didactic novel, I would beg to differ. The different point of view is very effective, but also necessary. Why are we only seeing the story of a war in a country not our own through the lens of war movies we make? (If this topic interests you, definitely read his non-fiction work.) But the entire novel is also slowly revealed as a confession, written by a central unnamed character (I'm guessing his name is Viet) during his time in a Reeducation camp. These camps were real things, and the last 100 pages are a brutal account of psychological and physical torture and brainwashing.

So there is the point of view (powerful), the approach (confession), but the greatest element of the novel for me is the writing. Nguyen plays with the English language in a way I haven't seen. I don't think he would claim his background as the reason because he has been in the United States for most of his life, in fact is an English professor, among other duties. But I was constantly amused/surprised by his use of words, taking a word like *perineum* that is almost inclusively a body part and using it to refer to a time of day that is hidden from view, gross, and better slept through:

"...We followed our usual routine and drank with joyless discipline until we both passed out. I woke up in the perineum of time between the very late hours of the evening and the very early hours of the morning, grotty sponge in my mouth..."

That is an example of me stopping, putting the book aside, looking up the word, asking, "Do we use that word that way?", finding we don't, but deciding we should because obviously it works. It is this clever crafting of words that kept me reading, more than the events, more than the unnamed agent antics of the central character ("a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces....")

I really love the last three pages, but I will leave those for the reader to mull over.

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## **BlackOxford says**

### **The Darkness of Democracy**

When Donald Trump blasts "Make America Great Again", it may not be obvious that 'again' has a very

specific historical reference: the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, the day the United States lost its first war. This event opens *The Sympathizer*. The Donald cannot mention Vietnam; it is still too painful and embarrassing a topic in American politics even after more than 40 years. There was no attack on a US ship in the Tonkin Gulf, there were no dominoes waiting to fall, there were no oppressed freedom-loving people to defend. These were fabrications. The Vietnam War in the US has the same emotional significance as the First World War to Germany during the Weimar Republic. It is a reminder of not just defeat, and government deceit but of purported betrayal by one's fellow countrymen - hippies, liberals, draft dodgers, inconstant politicians. The fact that Trump arranged to have himself exempted from being drafted into the Vietnam War - through equivalent fabrication - makes him even more emotionally dedicated to ensuring his own past disappears into that period when America believed itself not just courageous, and honest but competent, and above all exceptional among nations. His recent attack on former Vietnamese prisoner of war John McCain as a 'loser' was not so much personal as a metaphysical rejection of Trump's as well as the country's own history.

This novel is acutely prescient not only about the archetypal American/Trumpian neurosis, which it satirises so mercilessly, but also about the political effects of that neurosis. The conflict in Vietnam has become an historical metaphor for what is happening in American politics as I write this review. The route from Weimar to National Socialism in the Germany of the 1930's, as many have already noted, has much the same scenery as the rise of Trump. The similarity is not congenial to many Americans. Nguyen's staging of the problem of America in Vietnam is therefore brilliant. That he doesn't provide a happy dénouement is simply prudence not lack of imagination. Many others who have studied the problem reach a similar impasse.

For example, in 1943, two weeks before her death, the young philosopher Simone Weil wrote a short essay 'On the Abolition of All Political Parties'. In it she distinguishes the meaning and practice of political parties in continental Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world of America and Britain. Both types involve the passionate espousal of a point of view on the shape and content of the general good. Weil likes neither type - the British because, although it dissipates passions, the result is compromise which everyone can accept but no one really wants. The continental, because it enflames passions to the point where Jacobin ferocity puts "one party in power and all the others in jail". Frustration with the former naturally leads to the latter. The slide from reason to controllable passion to Gnostic dictatorship in which each party accuses the other, not only of error but of the vile civil evil of treason is, she implies, inevitable. This she foresees is the real threat of and to democracy: the corruption of the souls and consciences of those who participate in party politics. It is difficult not to perceive in the recently held Republican National Convention precisely this slide from rational perception of one's personal interests to the ultimate demonisation of the other side as pervers, traitors and liars: "Hillary for Prison", "Hillary the Traitor of Benghazi".

*The Sympathizer* is in large part about Weil's inevitable slide into the abyss of party politics. The locus is not Cleveland (although much of the book takes place in America) and the protagonist is not American (but significantly European/Asian). Nevertheless the not-so-hidden force of the narrative is American culture and American military and political power in the character of the mysterious Claude. One clue to the metaphorical intent of the book is that Claude (and his intellectual avatar Hedd) is apparently the only proper name in the book. The other characters are either roles - the Captain, the General, the Auteur, the Parisian aunt, the crapulent major - or veiled descriptors in languages other than English - Man, Bon, Sofia Mori. What the named character of Claude promotes is simply the creation and the continuing passionate hatred and conflict between the two historical factions of Vietnamese before during and after the war. He plots and meddles and tortures and encourages strife endlessly, not for any obvious ideology or advantage but just because he can.

Claude is America and what America does - not just to others but to itself. Not until halfway through the

book, despite several hints, does it become apparent that it is actually about representative democracy not Vietnam: "Not to own the means of production can lead to premature death, but not to own the means of representation is also a kind of death." muses the spy-protagonist who is having a rather different kind of political awakening than he anticipated during his life in the West. The real question is how anyone can be politically represented. Neither liberal democracy nor the dictatorship of the proletariat makes a satisfactory solution to the problem. All politics fail from time to time. Perhaps not inevitably as Weil feared, but certainly when it comes under control by the Claudes of the world.

Donald Trump is the potentially fatal flaw in American representative democracy. Clearly Nguyen knew nothing of Trump's prospective rise to political fame as he wrote. But he didn't need to. Trump is a type, the dark side of America that lurks constantly in wait to mug the entire country, and as much of the rest of the world that is within reach. It is this dark side which is so obvious to non-Americans, especially non-European non-Americans. And it is this side which Nguyen describes with such horrible accuracy. A timely reminder therefore of the real danger we face.

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## Michael says

If you ever struggle with your feelings and understanding about America's role in the Vietnam War, this book could give you a useful framework to both widespread blaming and forms of forgiveness to both sides. There really was no right side to be on, and the Vietnamese people became a pawns in a larger struggle: *Our country itself was cursed, bastardized, partitioned into north and south, and if it could be said of us that we chose division and death in our uncivil war, that was also only partially true. We had not chosen to be debased by the French, to be divided by them into an unholy trinity of north, center, and south, and to be turned over to the great powers of capitalism and communism for a further bisection, then given roles as the clashing armies of a Cold War chess match played in air-conditioned rooms by white men wearing suits and lies.*

With this story we get a rare, authentic Vietnamese perspective here that delves masterfully into the large questions of identity in the context of nationalism, race, culture, and morality. Written by a Vietnamese immigrant, this Pulitzer Prize winning book is incredibly ambitious and often challenging to read. It's hard to identify with the slippery duality of the narrator, who served as a communist spy within the South Vietnamese republic and continues to do so while in America. His intellectual and sardonic tone creates an ongoing barrier in the reader's emotional engagement with his fate. Yet, this approach was very effective to lead me to begin to see everything about this hot spot for the superpower's Cold War in many shades of gray rather than an unrealistic black and white. In an interview published at the end of the hardback, Nguyen usefully explains some of his goal with the book:

*I did not want to write this book as a way of explaining the humanity of Vietnamese. Toni Morrison says in Beloved that to have to explain yourself to white people distorts you because you start from a position of assuming your inhumanity or lack of humanity in other people's eyes. Rather than writing a book that tries to affirm humanity, which is typically the position that minority writers are put into, the book starts from the assumption that we are human, and then goes on to prove that we're also inhuman at the same time.*

The story begins in the middle and works alternately backward and forward. We start with the life of this "sleeper" agent who has recently immigrated to California after the fall of Saigon 1975. The narration has the flavor of both justification and confession. We only know him as the 'captain', his rank as an aide to the general commanding the South Vietnam secret police, with whom he fled with the relatively small fraction

of natives loyal to the Americans. His conflicted persona has early origins in his life as an offspring of a French priest and peasant Vietnamese girl, earning him lifelong revulsion and mistrust as a bastard. He has chosen a path set by the communists seeking freedom and independence from all colonialists, and his role of spy in the midst of his countrymen on the side of the American aggressors suits his chameleon character.

The pompous Oriental studies professor for whom he works as a menial assistant puts forth a theory that for him to balance the Asian and Western traits in his character will make him especially valuable for the collective effort to forge a way for East and West to coexist. While in many ways reviling his Western half, the idea of him being a one-man “melting pot” aligns with his mother’s mantra to him: “Remember, you’re not half of anything, you’re twice of everything”.

*My weakness for sympathizing with others has much to do with my status as a bastard, which is not to say that being a bastard naturally predisposes one to sympathy. Many bastards behave like bastards, and I credit my gentle mother with teaching me the idea that blurring the lines between us and them can be a worthy behavior.*

The captain truly does sympathize with the general in his integrity and honest choice to fight the communists. He admires the general’s efforts to get everyone who served with him out of country in the tragic chaos of the last days before total takeover of Saigon. We get a harrowing narrative of those last days, including the death of his best friend’s family. The caption also shares in the exiles’ sense of alienation and depression as they struggle to adapt to life in America. The ordinary Americans understand so little of what they have been through or what their blundering under naïve idealism has wreaked on their country (“No one asks poor people if they want war”). When the captain was an exchange student in the U.S. in high school, he didn’t feel this alienated, as it was natural to be treated as an exotic foreigner. Now it is easy to identify with the general trying not to succumb to despair over the loss of his country. Others do not do so well, *...a fair percentage collecting both welfare and dust, moldering in the stale air of subsidized apartments as their testes shriveled day by day, consumed by the metastasizing cancer called assimilation and susceptible to the hypochondria of exile.*

Our protagonist also empathizes with the general’s daughter Lana, who embraces the wild life of the youth culture in California, going so far as to perform in skimpy dress with a musical group. Our captain is too human to resist her charms:

*I quietly quaffed my cognac, discreetly admiring Lana’s legs. Longer than the Bible and a hell of a lot more fun, they stretched forever, like an Indian yogi or an American highway shimmering through the Great Plains or the southwestern desert. Her legs demanded to be looked at and would not take no, non, nein, nyet, or even maybe for an answer.*

Eventually, our captain gets drawn into the evolution of plans to lead an insurgency against the communist victors using resources of sympathetic right-wing Americans (shade of the “Bay of Pigs” incursion by expatriate Cubans). And this is exactly his job, to monitor and report in coded communications such counter-revolutionary activity to his handler. It’s so eerie how good our protagonist’s work is as a double agent, all founded on his human capacity to sympathize with others. But over and over in this tale we get this message: *A person’s strength was always his weakness, and vice versa.*

He suffers when in the course of serving the general he has to participate in the elimination of exiles suspected of being communist agents. Back in Saigon, when he had to participate, even indirectly, in the torture of suspected Viet Cong for his work with the secret police, he was doubly guilty when the victim was a legitimate agent, and he could do nothing to intervene without blowing his cover.

This read totally twists you up. The career of a double agent is so far from the life of a true believer on either side of a conflict. As a reader, the beginnings of empathy for this deceptive character comes when he is tormented by the experience of ghosts of the innocent who die as collateral damage from his career. At one point he gets to act with a purpose in unity with both the communist and anticommunist drivers in his life: a service as an advisor to a movie director in the process of making a film along the lines of “Apocalypse Now”, i.e. “an epic about white men saving good yellow people from bad yellow people”, one “where the losers would write history instead of the victors, courtesy of the most efficient propaganda machine ever created.” When asked to review the script for authenticity with respect to Vietnamese culture, our captain is affronted that there is no speaking part for a Vietnamese character:

*In this forthcoming Hollywood trompe d’oeil, all the Vietnamese of any side would come out poor, herded into the roles of the poor, the innocent, the evil, or the corrupt. Our fate was not to be merely mute; we were to be struck dumb.*

Quite a worthwhile section of this book is devoted to our protagonist’s efforts to work with the the Vietnamese extras from the exile community at the filming location in the Philippines. This was the best part of the book for me. The parts the arrogant “auteur” puts into the film for Vietnamese characters ends up being ones of incredible brutality of the Vietnamese against each other, with Americans retaining hero status on the side. Not exactly what our captain wanted, but a fair allegory of the war itself. The mirror held up for American readers like me can be pretty powerful. For my own history I dodged the draft by raising my blood pressure and participated in anti-war actions like the big march on Washington, yet was taken aback with shame over Jane Fonda’s friendly confab with Ho Chi Minh and with our ultimate failure to stop the dominoes falling. No hand-washing can clean our guilt, but as a nation, we shrugged it all off:

*Americans are a confused people because they can't admit this contradiction. They believe in a universe of divine justice where the human race is guilty of sin, but they also believe in a secular justice where human beings are presumed innocent.*

*You know how Americans deal with it? They pretend they are eternally innocent no matter how many times they lose their innocence. The problem is that those who insist on their innocence believe anything they do is just. At least we who believe in our own guilt know what dark things we can do.*

The story is brought to a dramatic conclusion in a harrowing sections in the end, which I will steer clear of any revelation. The only hint I will give is that we learn why the narrative has the flavor of a confession of sorts. And we understand how our protagonist’s admirable efforts at loyalty both of his two “blood brother” friends from childhood end up contributing of some serious soul rendering, as one serves with the general’s crew and the other is his secret communist handler.

I feel this book will stand the test of time as a classic, up there with Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” and Greene’s “The Quiet American”.

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