

## Author Spotlight

# VIET THANH NGUYEN



Viet Thanh Nguyen was born March 13, 1971 in Buon Me Thuot, Vietnam. His family fled to the United States following the Fall of Saigon in 1975, eventually making their way to San Jose, California. He received a PhD in English from UC, Berkeley in 1997 and teaches at the University of Southern California. *The Sympathizer*, published in 2015, is Nguyen's first novel, for which he received the Pulitzer Prize. He is also the author of a short story collection, *The Refugees* (2016), and two works of scholarly nonfiction. Nguyen is married to fellow writer-professor Lan Duong, with whom he has one child.

*The Sympathizer* is the story of a nameless protagonist who acts as a secret agent—a communist mole who has infiltrated the South Vietnamese army. The novel opens during the final stages of the Vietnam War. Following the Fall of Saigon, the protagonist is ordered by his communist handler to join the horde of refugees fleeing the country, eventually making his way to Southern California. There he infiltrates the South Vietnamese expatriate community, which includes many former military officers who, with the help of American agents, are plotting to stage a coup against the recently victorious Vietnamese communist regime. As a spy and political ideologue, the protagonist must navigate the complexities and acute self-doubt of a double identity: colluding in South Vietnamese military plans while secretly undermining them, yielding at times to the temptations of American consumer culture while fighting to remain committed to his socialist ideals. The missions he is tasked with undertaking require him to confront not only his own sense of virtue and humanity, but all the existential crises attached to a life lived almost entirely in disguise.

Upon publication, *The Sympathizer* met with near-universal critical acclaim. Many critics noted the ingenuity of the narrative, which effortlessly spans several different genres of fiction: historical, spy, and dark comedy to name only a few. In particular, Nguyen was praised for shifting the traditional American view of the Vietnam War to focus instead on the perspectives, motivations, and internal dilemmas of the North Vietnamese. Critic Philip Caputo wrote in the *NYT Book Review* that the novel “fills a void in the literature [of the Vietnam War], giving voice to the previously voiceless.” In another laudatory review, Ron Charles of *Washington Post Book World* called the novel “a new classic of war fiction,” while also praising Nguyen for transcending mere war fiction and “plumb[ing] the loneliness of human life, the costs of fraternity and the tragic limits of our sympathy.”

Between 2015-2016, *The Sympathizer* won six major literary awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction. As a testament to the genre-bending nature of the narrative, Nguyen was also awarded the Edgar Award for Best First Novel, which honors achievements in mystery fiction.

Prepared by Jody Smith

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Sources: *Grove Atlantic*, *New York Times*, *New Yorker*, *VietNugyen.info*, *Washington Post*



## Discussion Questions for *The Sympathizer*

1. Discuss the relevance of the title, *The Sympathizer*. Who do you think the author wants the reader to sympathize with? What are the different ways throughout the book that the author demonstrates sympathetic characters and situations?
2. The novel opens with a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche: “Let us not become gloomy as soon as we hear the word ‘torture’: in this particular case there is plenty to offset and mitigate that word—even something to laugh at.” How is this sentiment explored in *The Sympathizer*? Discuss this statement as it applies to the characters in the novel and Vietnam.
3. How has the refugee experience in America changed since the Vietnam War? Has it changed much or not at all? Or both?
4. What adjustments has the United States made in how it deals with countries during and after war? What are the lessons learned from the Vietnam War and how have those lessons been applied to current wars?
5. What is the author saying about the effects of war on politics?
6. How are dreams used to discuss duality? What deeper meaning do the dreams represent for the Captain’s already fractured psyche?
7. Why do you think the author included a supernatural element in *The Sympathizer*? How does the presence of ghosts change the protagonist? What do they represent to the narrator? Are the readers meant to take the presence of the ghosts literally?
8. Guilt is a theme throughout the novel. What is the role of guilt in the lives of the characters? Does it compel them to try and right past wrongs, or make them more culpable? Or both?
9. What is the function of sexuality in the novel? How are sexuality and the war intertwined, according to Nguyen?
10. Mao said: “art and literature were crucial to revolution” what role, if any, does art and literature play in politics? “Movies were America’s way of softening up the rest of the world.” Do you agree or disagree with this assessment? Provide examples of movies you have seen that accomplish this.
11. On page 274, Ms. Mori declares “you must claim America” what does she mean by this? Do you agree or disagree with her? Do you think this is how refugees and immigrants feel once they come to America? Explain your answers.
12. Why is the narrator of *The Sympathizer* important? Is he a reliable narrator?
13. What affect does the narrator’s arrival in America have on his “two minds?” Discuss the changes in his relationship with Man, Bon, and the General after he becomes a refugee.
14. On page 15, the narrator says about Man and Bon: “These men were better than any real brothers I could have had, for we had chosen each other.” Discuss the role family plays in the lives of the different characters in the novel.

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## Discussion Questions for *The Sympathizer* continued

15. The narrator states early in the novel: “If ever circumstances forced us into a situation where death was the price of our brotherhood, I had no doubt that Man and I would pay.” Do you think he is foreshadowing events to come? Why or why not? Why do you think he feels this way about himself and Man but doesn’t include Bon?
16. Throughout the novel Man, Bon, and the narrator are referred to as a group, but let’s take a deeper look at the blood brothers individually—who is Man, Bon, and the narrator? What makes them blood brothers and what sets them apart? Of the three why is the narrator the only one without a name?
17. Why is the Captain more upset by his reaction to being called a bastard than the word itself?
18. There are several compelling female characters: Madame, Ms. Mori, the narrator’s mother, and Lana. Discuss how Nguyen fleshes out the female characters and their roles in the novel.
19. What does the narrator discover about himself when he travels to the Philippines to consult on *The Hamlet*? What is his greatest challenge there? How are his expectations and memories transformed by this visit? In what way does the Captain identify with the movie extras? How does he set himself apart from them?
20. The Captain describes himself as “morally disorientated” following the death of the crapulent Major, what do you think he means by this? Do you think he discovers something previously unknown about himself? Explain your opinions.
21. At one point Sonny describes love as “being able to talk to someone else without effort, without hiding, and at the same time to feel absolutely comfortable not saying a word.” How do you describe love? Discuss whether you have experienced the kind of love Sonny feels for Ms. Mori.
22. How does Sonny serve as a foil to the narrator? Why do you think the narrator confesses to Sonny? What is the significance of the narrator’s visit to Lana before meeting with Sonny? He also returns to her after the “deed is done,” why do you suppose he does this? What is he hoping to find?
23. What does the female agent mean when she is asked her name and she replies: “My surname is Viet and my given name is Nam?” In that moment, is she meant to represent Vietnam? Who else in the novel could be a substitute for the country? How does Vietnam function as a character in the story?
24. Do you feel the harrowing experience of the female agent was meant to humanize the narrator? What was your initial reaction after he recalls the memory? How did this affect your attitude toward the narrator?
25. At the end of the novel, the narrator “graduates” and is finally allowed to meet the commissar. How does the narrator react when he learns who that is? What was your reaction to the reveal?
26. After everything that the narrator has been through his last words are a passionate celebration of life “We will live!” Why do you think the author chose to end the novel on such an optimistic note? Were you surprised by the ending? What are your thoughts about what is happening in the last chapter?

Source: <https://groveatlantic.com>

