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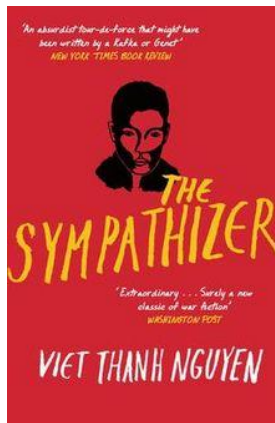
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Book Review: Nguyen, V. T. (2016). *The Sympathizer: A Novel*. New York, NY: Grove Atlantic. 384 pp. ISBN: 978-1543618020

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The Sympathizer sets itself apart from other war novels in the genre. Nguyen (2016) brilliantly designates the main character, a Vietnamese French army captain as his protagonist and narrator. As a spy for the north, and immersed in the south, the unnamed narrator experiences both the expected and unexpected chaos of playing the double agent. With a combination of humor and poignancy, the novel offers full transparency into the lives of those impacted by the war and summons the long overdue undivided attention and empathy of readers' on the Vietnam War. The multilayered novel elucidates the complex relationships between the Far East and Western culture as well as the divided north and south of a single nation. Everyday relationships continue to be dissected as friendship and family ties are scrutinized.

Readers are immediately acquainted with the verbosity of the educated sympathizer who explicitly contends with himself from the first lines of the book until the very last page. While paradoxical, his set of virtues remains questionable. The narrator is described as the illegitimate product of his beloved Vietnamese mother and scorn French priest father. Despite his disadvantaged upbringing, he manages to acquire an education in the United States and returns to Vietnam where he simultaneously serves as a right hand man to a leader of the South and a spy for the North. His narrative takes the form of a confession, rendering fully exposed and intricate details to make this book a page-turner. Readers quickly learn in early chapters that his two closest comrades, sworn into brotherhood by blood causes one to question the notion of loyalty. Bon is the glorified patriot of the south, determined to avenge his father's death. Meanwhile, their third brother, Man, is the narrator's bridge to the north. This unorthodox friendship goes through trial under a series of volatile and bona fide events. The novel takes a transition over to the United States at the tail end of the war. Given an extended duty, the narrator escapes his war torn country and seeks refugee in southern California as he kept a close watch on the general and reports intelligence feeds to Man.

The new, but temporary life calls upon the narrator's expertise in creative ways where his diverse layers unfold. The sympathizer is capable of committing a range of dark deeds and acts of



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kindness. He attempts to advocate for the Vietnamese on a Hollywood film set but is egregiously dismissed. Soon after, his original devotion of which he was tasked to do goes into effect. The general and his fellow South Vietnamese clan arrange a counterrevolution that is carefully reported to the North by letters written between Man and the narrator. The narrator is subjected to fulfilling his dual roles without raising suspicion. His line of work widened to include the act of murder. The storyline plunges into the deep waters as it takes a shift in setting back into Vietnam where the most unyielding of circumstances are dealt with head on.

Nguyen (2016) unravels a myriad of untold experiences through what feels like a welcomed and entirely candid history lesson. As alluded to in a savvy manner, the Vietnamese perspective lacks a presence in the literature to which this novel serves as a major breath of fresh air. Nguyen and his protagonist both commit to unpacking the Vietnam War in a de-Americanized fashion. The overall narrative is absolutely well fleshed out and anything but subtle in its attempt to deter the commonly oversimplified experiences of the Vietnam War.

About the Author



Linh Dang, M.A. is a Ph.D. candidate in Educational Policy and an adjunct faculty member of master's and doctoral-level research methods courses at the University of Rochester. She recently received her advanced certificate in online teaching and teaches both face-to-face and virtual courses. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Politics with a minor in Asian Studies and a Master's in Education along with her teaching credentials at the University of San Francisco. Her research assesses the educational experiences of immigrant students, particularly Southeast Asians in the United States public education system. Using an asset-based approach, she investigates both barriers and different forms of capital that shape adult outcomes for this population. She sits on the doctoral student editorial review board of the *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement (JSAAEA)*.



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