

Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies
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Review

Nguyen, Bich Minh. *Pioneer Girl*. New York: Viking, 2014. 296 pp. \$16.00 paper.

Nguyen, unlike many previous Vietnamese American authors, focuses more upon the second-generation Vietnamese Americans who grew up in the United States and did not experience the hardships that their parents had faced during and after the war under communism. The novel is narrated by Lee, a jobless U.S.-born Vietnamese American Ph.D. graduate, returns to live with her family and helps her mother, Tran, run their family-owned Vietnamese restaurant in a suburb of Chicago. Lee's grandfather, Ong Hai, becomes the close family member from whom she seeks comfort and sympathy whenever Tran berates or vents her anger upon her. Tran favors her son, Sam, over Lee, although he is a college dropout and has caused her much trouble. Lee always has lived surrounded by secrets and mysteries: her mother does not talk about her father, nor does she share with Lee information about her past in Vietnam. Thus, Lee has grown up in the United States knowing very little about her father, his death, and her parents' marriage and their earlier life in Vietnam.

The novel takes an intriguing twist when Lee embarks on a journey to discover the identity of a mysterious American journalist named Rose, who patronized Ong Hai's Café 88 in Saigon during the Vietnam War. One day, Rose dropped (or probably simply forgot) a small gold pin on a table where she had sat at Café 88, and she never returned to claim it. Born and growing up in the United States, Lee was always interested in the TV series *Little House on the Prairie*, an adaptation of Laura Ingalls Wilder's best-selling *Little House* series of books. As a child, Lee had imagined the pin to be an heirloom from Laura Ingalls Wilder and developed a personal connection with the pin—assuming that it was Laura's secret gift to Lee, because somewhere in Wilder's *These Happy Golden Years*, the author mentions a gold pin as a Christmas gift given to Laura by her husband, Almanzo. The rest of the novel focuses on Lee's journeys to

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Iowa, Missouri, and San Francisco to do research on Laura Ingalls Wilder and to discover Rose's identity. The novel ends on a note only of possibility or probability, as Ong Hai might have been the man in the faded photo Rose took in 1965, and the gold pin could have been an heirloom belonging to Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Structurally, the interweaving and intersection of the Lee's familial life and her academic journey complicate the overarching plot of *Pioneer Girl*: events are narrated in a non-chronological sequence, and in each chapter there are stories within stories. Hybridity is a major characteristic of the novel: the author integrates into the narrative elements from real-life events (as indicated in the Acknowledgements), biographical facts related to the historical author Laura Ingalls Wilder and her relatives, aspects of the TV series *Little House on the Prairie*, various cultural critiques, and elements from Nguyen's imagination. To confuse matters further, some readers might believe, based on the tone developed by the first-person narrator, that the book is a memoir or an autobiography. Stylistically, *Pioneer Girl* is quite accessible to both high school and college students. The novel has several suspenses that keep the reader's interest because the reader becomes absorbed in the protagonist's journeys in discovering the real identity of Rose and her gold pin, as well as the connections between characters. Elements of humor and mystery make the novel an enjoyable read.

Thematically, *Pioneer Girl* focuses on a general theme of family secrets. The silence of Lee's mother and her refusal to share past events with her children are a primary cause of Lee's feelings of rootlessness: "My own origins were forever vague to me, lost through language and war, maintainable only through Ong Hai's remembered stories that had no documentation" (213). Lee's questions about her family's background are met only with her mother's "frowning silence, a suspicious counter-questioning: Why do you want to know?" (89). Because she is denied access to her family's history and to her mother's private thoughts, Lee embarks on an academic journey to discover the identity of Rose as a means of escape and of discovery. White entitlement or privilege is another theme addressed in Nguyen's novel. While *Little House on the Prairie* is commonly praised for its portrayal of an idealized American family, loving parenthood, community solidarity, America's pioneering spirit, and

human determination in hostile situations, Lee points out that the white characters in Wilder's books "had a baseline of white entitlement: the Indian lands should, of course, be given to white settlers; the only good Indian was a dead Indian. ... The Ingallses roamed as if any parcel of land out West might be theirs for the taking" (71). To some Americans, the United States is the land of and for white people. Ironically, although both Lee and her brother, Sam, were born in America and speak English without a foreign accent, they are cast as "perpetual foreigners" because they are "different" (31). From the Vietnamese perspective, Nguyen's *Pioneer Girl* also highlights the privilege that boys enjoy over girls in a traditional Vietnamese family. Tran favors Sam, despite his wrongdoings and decadent lifestyle. In her mother's eyes, Lee is a worthless daughter, despite her academic achievement, while "Sam was the wanted child" the moment he was born (28). Some other themes that Nguyen's novel treats include the mother-daughter relationship, food and ethnic identity, dysfunctional communication, alienation caused by displacement, and immigrant hardships that are common in Vietnamese American writing.

Pedagogically, in order to fully appreciate Nguyen's novel, it is important that students know about Laura Ingalls Wilder and the TV series *Little House on the Prairie*, was popular in the 1970s and 1980s. Knowledge about this TV series helps students understand the relationship between popular culture and literature, between the 19th-century history of U.S. Expansionism and the exclusion of the early Asian American experience from U.S. national history and culture. The novel critiques the Eurocentrism of U.S. literature and history. By weaving the historical significance of America's pioneer experience, represented by the white characters in Wilder's *Little House* books, with the significance of the refugees' experience of Lee's Vietnamese family before and after the Vietnam War, Lee emphasizes that the European Americans and the Vietnamese Americans share some parallel events: "[M]y own concept of American history had been unknowingly shaped just by reading those books [*Little House*]. ... [T]hey had rooted in me a paradox of pride and resentment—a desire to be included in the American story and a knowledge of the limits of such inclusion. Like the Chinese workers who helped build the transcontinental railroad and yet were left out of pictures

and edged out of history” (248). By personalizing and familiarizing the history of the Ingalls family, Lee transforms it into a parallel construction of her own Vietnamese American identity.

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