



Voices
from the
Gaps

Le Ly Hayslip

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“Look at those awful people!” Erma would say when stories about “Viet Cong atrocities” filled the [TV] screen. To her and Larry, the enemy had one face. Ed and Leatha, like me, just sat in silence, speaking only when Jimmy’s playing got too loud or little Tommy began to cry. I understood the newscasters, and the pictures spoke for themselves. But where the Munros saw faceless Orientals fleeing burning villages, tied up as prisoners, or as rag dolls in a roadside trench (even innocent villagers were “VC” or “Charlie”), I saw my brother Bon Nghe, who fought twenty-five years for the North; my mother’s nephew, who was lieutenant for the South; my sister Lan, who hustled drinks to the Americans in Danang; and my sister Hai, who shared sleepless nights with my mother in our family bunker at Ky La. I saw floating on the smoke of battle the soul of my dead brother, Sau Ban, victim of an American land mine, and the spirit of my father, who drank acid to avoid involving me again with the Viet Cong terrorists. I saw in those tiny electronic lines, as I saw in my dreams, the ghosts of a hundred relatives, family friends, and playmates who died fighting for this side or that, or merely to survive.

— Child of War, Woman of Peace

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1949
- * Vietnamese-American memoirist
- * The film *Heaven and Earth* is based on her memoirs

This page was researched and submitted by Christina K. Soderstrom on 3/6/97.



Le Ly Hayslip

Biography continued

Le Ly Hayslip was born in 1949 in Ky La, a village near Da Nang, Vietnam. The seventh child in a peasant farm family, she received only a third grade education because she spent her childhood in the shadow of the Vietnam War, or “American War.” Her brothers fought in both the Republican and Communist armies. By the time she was fourteen, she had endured torture in a South Vietnamese government prison for “revolutionary sympathies,” had fallen under suspicion for being a government spy, and was sentenced to death by the Vietcong. But instead of killing her, her executors raped her, and she fled to Da Nang and then Saigon where she worked as a maid, black market vendor, waitress, and hospital attendant.

When Hayslip was twenty-one, she married an American civilian who was working in Vietnam. In 1970, they escaped to the United States. After her husband’s death, she began writing her childhood memories. James, her oldest son, helped her find the right words in English and type the manuscript. Working as a housekeeper, factory assembly line worker, and restaurant host and manager, she supported her three sons through adventures with two husbands, the “love of her life,” fundamentalist Christians, and a swindler. Her passionate determination and strong Buddhist faith helped her to thrive as an American citizen, and she started a charitable organization, The East Meets West Foundation, to provide relief to the people of her war-torn home and comfort to American veterans.

Hayslip’s first memoir, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, was written with the help of Jay Wurts and published in 1989. The book was well-received overall; a writer for the *New York Times Book Review* describes it as “touching and illuminating . . . lucid, lyrical . . . a searing human account.” The memoir examines Hayslip’s theme of survival as she relates her misfortunes during the Vietnam War and the achievements of her return to her mother and her homeland after sixteen years in the United States. Told in a lively, honest style, she recalls her tumultuous childhood in rural Vietnam and her eventual escape to America. Her story juxtaposes the tale of her return in a journal-like style complete with dates and locations with tales of the past’s shadowy memories.



Le Ly Hayslip

Biography continued

Lynne Bundesen, contributor for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, comments: “Her story . . . is the private side of the Vietnamese war. The private side of any war is rarely told, and it is, supremely, the woman’s side . . . Hayslip gives us the point of view of Anywoman, combining her autobiography with an eyewitness account of Vietnam’s history over the last forty years.” Though her story is amazing, Trang Hoang, a Vietnamese-American writer from the University of California in Los Angeles, reminds American readers that “as innocent readers, we need to remind ourselves that this is only one person’s experience and cannot be representative of the collective. The book is a chronicle of Hayslip’s extraordinary life. It does not portray the life of an average Vietnamese citizen.”

Hoang also warns readers of Hayslip’s biases against the Southern Republican government and against most Vietnamese males except her father. Hayslip uses numerous Vietnamese terms to express herself throughout both her memoirs, but Hoang states that some of the words and phrases are incorrectly spelled and translated. Other reviewers also mention the “preachy” tone in the second half of the book, but the emphasis on hope and forgiveness seems to balance the negative aspects of the writing.

Hayslip’s second memoir, written in collaboration with her son James, was published in 1993. *Child of War, Woman of Peace* focuses on her life after her emigration to the U.S. in 1970. Shortly after settling in California with her first husband, Ed Munro, he dies. She remarries, but her second, abusive husband also quickly dies. This book was not as passionately received by reviewers, but she nonetheless captured praise for her ability to blend Eastern and Western values; Hayslip has been applauded for her contribution to the wealth of immigrant literature.

In December of 1993, Oliver Stone’s film, *Heaven and Earth*, was released. This movie is based on Hayslip’s two memoirs. Oliver Stone’s *Heaven and Earth* -- a narrative version of the screenplay with photographs by professional photographers and the director’s wife, Elizabeth Stone, and an introductory essay by Hayslip with Wurts -- was released in conjunction with the film. A Vietnamese edition of this book was printed, bringing Hayslip’s story full circle, and a percentage of the profits from all three books went to the East Meets West Foundation. Hayslip’s continuing success makes her an admirable social activist and writer.



Le Ly Hayslip

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