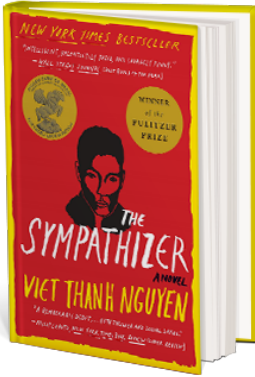


The Sympathizer

Discussion Questions



Author: Viet Thanh Nguyen
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fiction, War Story, Spy fiction

1. What does the narrator mean when he tells us, "I am a man of two minds"? How does this statement reverberate throughout the book?

2. Comparisons of this work have been made to Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, an absurdist take on World War II. Nguyen includes similar satire in *The Sympathizer*. One such example is this statement:

It was a smashingly successful cease-fire, for in the last two years only 150,000 soldiers had died. Imagine how many would have died without a truce!

Can you find other examples where the author employs similar satiric wit? What affect does such a stylistic device have on your reading? Does the black humor lessen the horror of the war, or draw more attention to it?

3. Talk about the conclusion of the book, which many describe as shattering. Was it so for you? How has the narrator been changed by his experiences? What has he come to learn about himself, his culpability, his identity, the war, America and Vietnam?

4. The narrator says that the war in Vietnam "was the first war where the losers would write history instead of the victors." What does he mean by that? What do you know (or remember) about the war—and how did you come to know it? How does point of view, who does the telling, alter one's understanding of history?

Author Bio

- Birth: 1971; Buon Me Thuot, Vietnam; Raised in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and San Jose, California
- Education: B.A., Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley
- Currently: Lives in Los Angeles, California

Viet Than Nguyen was born in Buon Me Thuot, Vietnam. He came to the United States as a refugee in 1975 with his family and was initially settled in Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, one of four such camps for Vietnamese refugees. From there, he moved to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where he lived until 1978.

Seeking better economic opportunities, his parents moved to San Jose, California, and opened one of the first Vietnamese grocery stores in the city. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, San Jose had not yet been transformed by the Silicon Valley economy, and was in many ways a rough place to live, at least in the downtown area where Viet's parents worked. He commemorates this time in his short story "The War Years" (*TriQuarterly* 135/136, 2009).

Education and teaching

Viet attended St. Patrick School and Bellarmine College Preparatory in San Jose. After high school, he briefly attended UC Riverside and UCLA before settling on UC Berkeley, where he graduated with degrees in English and ethnic studies. He stayed at Berkeley, earning his Ph.D. in English.

After getting his degree, Viet moved to Los Angeles for a teaching position at the University of Southern California, and has been there ever since.

Writing and awards

Viet's short fiction has been published in *Manoa*, *Best New American Voices 2007*, *A Stranger Among Us: Stories of Cross-Cultural Collision and Connection*, *Narrative Magazine*, *TriQuarterly*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Gulf Coast*, where his story won the 2007 Fiction Prize.

He has written a collection of short stories and an academic book called *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, which is the critical bookend to a creative project whose fictional bookend is *The Sympathizer* (2015). *Nothing Ever Dies* examines how the so-called Vietnam War has been remembered by many countries and people, from the US to Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and South Korea, across literature, film, art, museums, memorials, and monuments.

Viet has received the following awards for his works: Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, 2016; Edgar Award for Best First Novel, 2016; Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction, 2016; Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, 2015; Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature (Adult Fiction), 2015-2016; Finalist for the 2016 PEN/Faulkner Award.

Name

People not familiar with Vietnamese culture sometimes have a hard time pronouncing Viet's surname. The Anglicization of Nguyen leads to further issues. Is it pronounced Noo-yen? Or Win? It's never pronounced Ne-goo-yen. The Win version is closer to the Vietnamese and seems to be the favored choice for Vietnamese Americans.