

Book Club Kit Discussion Guide
The Sympathizer
By Viet Thanh Nguyen

Author:

Viet 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).

Summary:

A profound, startling, and beautifully crafted debut novel, The Sympathizer is the story of a man of two minds, someone whose political beliefs clash with his individual loyalties.

It is April 1975, and Saigon is in chaos. At his villa, a general of the South Vietnamese army is drinking whiskey and, with the help of his trusted captain, drawing up a list of those who will be given passage aboard the last flights out of the country.

The general and his compatriots start a new life in Los Angeles, unaware that one among their number, the captain, is secretly observing and reporting on the group to a higher-up in the Viet Cong.

The Sympathizer is the story of this captain: a man brought up by an absent French father and a poor Vietnamese mother, a man who went to university in America, but returned to Vietnam to fight for the Communist cause.

A gripping spy novel, an astute exploration of extreme politics, and a moving love story, *The Sympathizer* explores a life between two worlds and examines the legacy of the Vietnam War in literature, film, and the wars we fight today. (*From the publisher.*)

Questions:

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 identify, 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?