“The month in question was April, the cruelest month. It was the month in which a war that had run on for a very long time would lose its limbs, as is the way of wars. It was a month that meant everything to all the people in our small part of the world and nothing to most people in the rest of the world.”

“Americanization”, how the American

The narrator and protagonist of the story is a man who has no name and is only referred to as “the captain” throughout the book. We encounter him fleeing Saigon, accompanying a general of the South Vietnamese army, we know already that he has a secret. In the very first lines he reveals that he is a sleeper agent and actually working for the South Vietnamese military and the CIA. The captain’s narrative, which is the novel, is actually a confession; a confession addressed to the commandant of a communist re-education camp.

Readers are drawn into the multi-layered story with many flashback scenes that take us back into the captain’s childhood, youth and study years. We learn how he is the illegitimate child of a French priest and his young Vietnamese maid setting him up as their status, their ranks, and all the contradictions. The only two people he is really able to relate to after the death of his mother are his childhood friends and blood brothers Ton and Man. But the ideological gap also runs deep through their friendship and the borders between friend and foe eventually become blurred.

Soon after their arrival in the USA it becomes very clear that America is far from being the Promised Land and that whatever the refugees had before - their status, their ranks, and all the contradictions - have no other choice than to settle down for a most unglamorous life - in Hollywood of all places. And thus we see the former South Vietnamese ready to transport Nguyen’s prose quite well and therefore have to be combated. Nguyen goes even further here and creates a main character that can be seen as a metaphor for Vietnamese itself and its relationship to its foreign conquerors. But his background and upbringing are also quite literally the reasons why our protagonist became what he is: a mole, a spy, a secret agent. Being intelligent and with the ability to see everything from two sides, he worked his way up inside the South Vietnamese military and security establishment from where he reports to the communists, living a life full of duality and at times even contradiction. The only two people he is really able to relate to after the death of his mother are his childhood friends and blood brothers Ton and Man. But the ideological gap also runs deep through their friendship and the borders between friend and foe eventually become blurred.

One of the key scenes unfolds when the narrator is hired by an American director who is shooting a kind of “white-heroes-fighting-the-yellow-peril”-movie. The captain takes the job with the intention to “de-Americanize” the story of the film and to bring in some genuine Vietnamese input. However, he is being outsmarted by the director and eventually, from there on things deteriorate even further for the captain. The war is far from being over in the refugee community and the ideologies demand more victims. The captain gets even more deeply entangled to secure a clerical position at Occidental College. There, he is constantly confronted with the more or less subliminal friction from the head of the French American Studies and therefore has to write down his confession. The book culminates in a finale of interrogation and self-interrogation, confronting the captain with some fundamental questions of being human and according to which the split of his mind until, at last, driving him insane. As he regains mental clarity it becomes evident that there are no easy answers of what is right and what is wrong. In that sense it is just logical that this novel can’t be an easy and straightforward read. Furthermore, the very descriptive way of narrating is sometimes a little too overwhelming. Many times passages take on a stream-of-conscious-like flow where one has to focus extremely carefully in order to not miss an important detail. Some might find that this will disturb a smooth reading flow such that The Sympathizer is not a light read for lazy Sunday afternoons. The German translation by Wolfgang Müller transports Nguyen’s prose quite well and is mostly very accurate (rarely persons will for example observe that Müller quite rightly chose the Lord’s Prayer’s original catholic translation for a white audience, that his book itself speaks more to Vietnamese readers. However, with The Sympathizer winning the Pulitzer Prize, his audience will definitely widen and that is a very good thing because the world needs more people, who can see everything from at least two sides.”

When the Vietnamese “anh oi” is suddenly whispered by a male lover instead of a female one as one would expect (“Anh oii” means “Oh honey” in reference to a man). The book has so many layers and dimensions, which reaches beyond its historical context and open up to many more questions, exceeding the frame of this simple book review. I would suggest that you read the book yourself and see how much you can actually sympathize with the protagonist. Nguyen has stressed in many interviews that he is writing for a white audience, that his book speaks more to Vietnamese readers.