

BOOK REVIEW

The Sympathizer

A Vietnamese spy novel and the attempt to de-americanize our view on the war

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"The month in question was April, the cruellest 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."

1975, the Vietnam War has just ended, but the cold war and the clash of ideologies are still going on. This would of course be the perfect background for some run-of-the-mill thriller written by a white American for a Western audience. And without knowing anything further, we might first think that *The Sympathizer*, which was recently translated into German and marketed as a "thriller" and "spy novel", would be just one of those. However, things and people are all too often not what they seem to be – an adage which has never been more true than in this story.

Far more than simply a thriller, it is also a political novel, a satirical story, refugee literature and a critique of modern mass media, all interspersed with discursive passages and spiced with literary references and aphorisms.

Furthermore, the author is not a white American. *The Sympathizer* is the debut novel of Vietnamese-American Viet Thanh Nguyen, which won him the Pulitzer Prize in 2016 along with a great many other awards. Nguyen was born in Vietnam and grew up in the USA from where he experienced both cultures and had insight to both perspectives on the Vietnam War. He is a Professor of English and American Studies and Ethnicity primarily focused on "Americanization", how the American perspective continues to dominate film, literature and pop culture. His book is a critique of this prevailing view and includes the issues of acculturation and identity crisis of immigrants, along with the importance of loyalty

and relationships (or the lack of those).

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 Viet Cong and spying on 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 flashbacks that take us back into the captain's childhood, youth and study years abroad. We learn that he is the illegitimate, but very talented child of a French priest and his young Vietnamese maid setting him up as an outsider from the very beginning of his life. Being of so called "mixed blood" he is literally bearing duality in his body and also in his mind. He is a torn person, not really belonging anywhere. His father neglects him and does not seem to care much about the young mother; he just continues his hypocritical life as a catholic priest, keeping his family secret. This is the stuff Greek epics are made of (minus the catholic church, of course). Nguyen goes even further here and created a main character that can be seen as a metaphor for Vietnam 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 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 Bon and Man. But the ideological gap also runs deeply 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 battles they fought – no longer count. Nobody in the US is waiting for these former allies and they have no other choice than to settle down for a most unglamorous life – in Hollywood of all places. And thus we see the former general opening up a shabby liquor store, selling cheap booze and fighting shoplifters instead of the Viet Cong.

The captain on the other hand manages to secure a clerical position at Occidental College. There he is constantly confronted with the more or less subliminal racism from the head of the department, who sees him as a study object and constantly lectures him on what "the Orientals" are like. But the professor is hardly the only



Figure 1: Viet Thanh Nguyen with his mother in South Vietnam, early 1970s



Figure 2: Viet Thanh Nguyen in Berlin, August 2017

racist the captain encounters. Another splendid specimen is a foreign-policy expert, Dr. Richard Hedd, who in his book "Asian Communism and the Oriental Method of Destruction" delivers the "academic reasoning" for the war; his main thesis that Asians do not value life as Westerners do and therefore have to be combated. Interestingly enough, Dr. Hedd is not an American but an Englishman and thus some kind of meta-colonialistic spin doctor. Characters like Hedd and the professor are of course near-caricatures. However, reading the novel you might get the feeling that you have met all of those types in real life.

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 epically fails. 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 into a net of treachery and deception, eventually becoming a killer himself. Finally, he finds himself back in Vietnam on a suicide

mission together with a ragtag troop of former South Vietnamese ready to reconquer the motherland. This ends of course in a fiasco and the captain finds himself in captivity where he is forced 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 accusations which widen 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 bit 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 (nitpicky persons will for example observe that Müller quite rightly chose the Lord's Prayer's original catholic translation into German). Only a few things get lost in translation between English, Vietnamese and German; for example

when the Vietnamese "anh oi" is suddenly whispered by a male lover instead of a female one as one would expect ("Anh oi" 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 so 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 not writing for a white audience, that his books speak 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.

Bibliographic information

German edition:

Viet Thanh Nguyen (2017) *Der Sympathisant. Roman. Aus dem amerikanischen Englisch von Wolfgang Müller*. Karl Blessing Verlag, München 2017. 528 Seiten.

English language edition:

Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016) *The Sympathizer*. Grove Paperback. 419 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8021-2494-4.

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