

Book review Hanoi Hospital

Britta Schmitz



I have to admit: I am a fan of crime fiction. There is nothing better for a long train or plane ride than a gripping thriller. A lot of my first impressions of Sweden came from the novels written by Mankell and Co. It was only when I moved to Sweden that I realized that mine and grumpy, old Wallander's Scania were maybe not exactly the same. So, I was all the more eager to read "Hanoi Hospital" by David Frogier de Ponlevoy when I got my hands on it. After all, I have lived in Vietnam for a while. Would I be able to recognize the Hanoi I experienced while living there myself? Would the author succeed in explaining daily life in Vietnam to his Western readers and at the same time manage to captivate them with a thought through arc of suspense?

To begin with, this book wants to be a lot of things: It wants to be a classical whodunit, a coming-of-age story, a city novel and a report casting light on Vietnam's social problems in the age of economic transformation.

The story takes us to Hanoi, where some mysterious fatalities occur. Patients die while they are treated in public hospitals or they just disappear. A young girl hits a corpse and soon she and her cousin are hot on the trail of villains in lab coats, discovering

criminal schemes in Vietnam's medical system.

First of all, Frogier de Ponlevoy knows his stuff; he is – as far as a Westerner can be – an insider of the Vietnamese culture. He used to live in Vietnam from 2006-2014 and apparently did not spend those years in an "expat-bubble", secluded from the life of the ordinary people. His knowledge about the country and its customs as well as social and family structures seems to be really extensive.

So extensive that some passages of the novel might get tiring – especially when he indulges in describing seemingly endless lists of food or let his characters quote from Vietnam's ancient national epos "The Tale of Kieu".

But with this story he takes us deep inside the contemporary Vietnamese society and shows it to us from many angles; describing the events from five different perspectives. That is to say, the book does not have only one protagonist. Each chapter is dedicated to one of the four main characters representing different members of today's Vietnamese society. There is Linh, the shy "All-Vietnamese girl"; Anne, half Vietnamese – half German and stuck in an identity crisis, Tuan the migrant worker, who had to bury his dream of a better life in the capital and finally the doctor, highly educated but without moral conscience. Vietnam's ever growing expat circles are portrayed in Jonathan Axen, a

German expat-manager, who is drunk with success in business and thinking of himself as a one-off womanizer.

While it is an excellent idea to tell the story from different perspectives, this concept does not give enough room for deeper insights into the character's developments. Some of the protagonists appear rather woodcut-like or extremely exaggerated. The motives of the doctor for example can't be described by anything else than megalomania. Linh's development from being a conformist, shy translator to becoming a brave and highly-engaged journalist seems a bit over-the-top. And it stays unclear, why exactly the girls are getting so engaged in solving this case. However, Jonathan Axen, the arrogant expat, who seems to be portrayed in an especially exaggerated way, might be more realistic than one would like to think.

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Asia is full of this kind of expats, living pretentiously, loud and ostentatious. However, in "Hanoi Hospital" it is not just the "ugly foreigners" committing crimes against the poor Vietnamese people, Westerners and Vietnamese are hand in hand involved in criminal machinations.

The topic of the plot – crime and ethical violations in the medical sector – is more relevant than ever, not only in Vietnam. It leaves the reader wondering how medical advancement, profit for the economic actors and moral values can be combined ensuring the patients' welfare. Besides, when I first read the novel I was convinced that things like the falsified pharmaceutical study could not be happening that easily. But it seems that here, too, the author did an excellent research job. A friend of mine, who is global regulatory affairs manager for a big pharma firm

confirmed, that sadly enough a lot of misuse and manipulations are possible in the initial phases of pharma studies – even in countries like Vietnam where the legislation itself is quite strict.

"Hanoi Hospital" is an entertaining read while at the same time it is packed with insights and facts about Vietnam. The story has its weaknesses as a thriller and Linh is for sure not the new Lisbeth Salander, but it captivates with its vivid descriptions of life in Hanoi. I definitely recommend the book for everyone planning to travel to Vietnam or for those who just came back and want to keep that special Vietnam-feeling just a bit longer.

Bibliographic details

Frogier de Ponlevoy, David (2015): Hanoi Hospital. Conbook, Meerbusch, ISBN: 978-3-943176-91-9; until now only available in a German language edition.



Source: David Frogier de Ponlevoy.