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 dystopian novel and report casting light on Vietnam’s social problems in the age of economic transformation.

The story takes us to Hanoi, where a young girl hits a corpse and soon some mysterious fatalities occur. Patients die while they are treated in public hospitals or they just disappear. Some mysterious fatalities are 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 structures seems to be quite extensive. However, in “Hanoi Hospital” it is not just the “ugly foreigners” committing crimes against the poor Vietnamese people, Westerners and Vietnamese are hard 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. I have 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 were more realistic than one would like to think. 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.

The story has its weaknesses as a thriller and Linh is for sure not the new Lisbeth Salander; but it captures 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 atmosphere with insights and facts about Vietnam. The novel might get tiring – especially the fifth one, who is portrayed in Jonathan Axen, a German expat-manager, who is drunk with success in business and thinking of himself as a one-off astronaut.

In solving this case, however, Jonathan Axen, the arrogant expat, who seems to be portrayed in an especially exaggerated way, is more the protagonist. Each chapter is dedicated to one of the four main characters representing different niches of today’s Vietnamese society. There is Linh, the shy “All-Vietnamese girl”, representing the life of the ordinary people. Her knowledge about the country and its customs as well as social and family structures seems to be quite extensive. But she also knows Asia quite well with a Master in Modern China Studies and more than 10 years of living, studying and working in China and Vietnam. She is full of this kind of experts being present in the book and orientating the reader. However, in “Hanoi Hospital” it is not just the “ugly foreigners” committing crimes against the poor Vietnamese people. Westerners and Vietnamese are hard in hand involved in criminal machinations.

So extensive that some passages of the novel might get tiring – especially when the author describes seemingly endless lists of food or let his characters quote from Vietnam’s ancient national epic “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 no surprise, the book does not have only one protagonist. Each chapter is dedicated to one of the four main characters representing different niches of today’s Vietnamese society. There is Linh, the shy “All-Vietnamese girl”, representing the life of the ordinary people. Her knowledge about the country and its customs as well as social and family structures seems to be quite extensive. But she also knows Asia quite well with a Master in Modern China Studies and more than 10 years of living, studying and working in China and Vietnam. The main character is the越南人 Linh, the shy “All-Vietnamese girl”, representing the life of the ordinary people. Her knowledge about the country and its customs as well as social and family structures seems to be quite extensive. But she also knows Asia quite well with a Master in Modern China Studies and more than 10 years of living, studying and working in China and Vietnam.

First of all, Frogier de Ponlevoy seems a bit exaggerated way, might be more realistic than one would like to think. 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 no surprise, the book does not have only one protagonist. Each chapter is dedicated to one of the four main characters representing different niches of today’s Vietnamese society. There is Linh, the shy “All-Vietnamese girl”, representing the life of the ordinary people. Her knowledge about the country and its customs as well as social and family structures seems to be quite extensive. But she also knows Asia quite well with a Master in Modern China Studies and more than 10 years of living, studying and working in China and Vietnam.

Bibliographic details

Source: David Frogier de Ponlevoy.

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