

Commentary by Will Harris

Vietnam: A Traveler's Literary Companion.

If I simply said—"This is an outstanding collection of short fiction by both Vietnamese and Vietnamese American writers—buy it!"—I'd convey my honest assessment of this newly reprinted work. But it's as important to discuss what I think the editors of *Vietnam: A Traveler's Literary Companion* strive to achieve—to finally introduce a significant American audience to Vietnamese literature. This may seem like an obvious goal. But I'd suggest that "the Vietnamese" have emerged from the *bas relief* of American literary stereotype only in the last decade or so. By explaining that process of emergence, perhaps I'll show why *Vietnam: A Traveler's Literary Companion* is among the best Vietnamese short story collections available in English.

Two popular American books ironically signaled a fundamental shift in our perception and reception of the Vietnamese and their literature. American enthusiasm for Robert Olen Butler's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain: Stories* (1993) and Neil Jamieson's *Understanding Vietnam* (1993) indicated a new American receptivity toward the disastrous war, a willingness to begin the process of coming to terms with it by "seeing Vietnamese." Through the eyes of Butler's fictionalized Vietnamese expatriates living in the American South, we were sympathetically introduced to another view of American pop culture and attitudes, as well as to Vietnamese history, culture, folklore, and that receding war. Butler gave dimension to previously flattened types; his characters were real people, real Americans. And Jamieson's book, put simply, was and is the most perceptive work yet written by an American about Vietnam, fictional or non-fictional. If Butler somehow gave flesh to "the Vietnamese" in the popular American mind, then Jamieson gave us a steady glimpse, at least, of the heart of Vietnam. I'd be irresponsible if I didn't mention the significant peripheral contribution that Maxine Hong Kingston's and Amy Tan's earlier achievements made to a general public acceptance of "things Asian" in the popular American mind. But what

Butler and Jamieson proved to both Vietnamese and Vietnamese American writers and their publishers, was that their particular stories could now earn mainstream recognition and sell in this country.

I place what may be the most significant Vietnamese short story collections of the past ten years or so against the above backdrop. The publishers of these books attempted to give their authors both their own voices (rather than the proxy voices of mainstream representatives), and literary prominence. I'm implying as well that the compiling of a collection of such authors had and still has political and social valence, whether author and publisher overtly intended a "statement" or not. Although Ho Anh Thai is one of the most widely recognized postwar writers in Vietnam, his native literary star power did not carry his war-haunted 1998 collection *Behind the Red Mist* to wider fame in the American literary marketplace. In like manner, Le Minh Khue's riveting work, collected in *The Stars, the Earth, the River* (1997) might still have been too close to the flames of the Vietnam War for popular comfort, despite a relatively wide anthologizing of her individual short stories, and her frequent editing of Vietnam-related materials in this country. *The Other Side of Heaven* (1995) attempted to negotiate the continuing tensions of the war—while specifically addressing those tensions through Vietnamese writers—by setting these writers' works alongside popular American writers like Robert Olen Butler, Robert Stone, Tim O'Brien, Larry Heinemann, Bobbie Ann Mason, Philip Caputo, John Edgar Wideman. But this attempt to interest American readers by setting known sellers beside unknown writers had its drawbacks. The book was large—perhaps unwieldy at 400+—for a cultural introduction. And the feature that I think might have rocketed this book to notoriety—some script capturing the exchange of responses among these writers, some of whom may have been on opposing sides of a firing line—was strangely absent. The relatively familiar American authors, and their relatively familiar fictional environments, may have prevented readers from exploring the unknowns presented by the new authors. And the walk-in-the-garden conceit that attempted to tie the book together managed to be more of an ignored distraction from some exceptional writing.

Vietnam: A Traveler's Literary Companion successfully navigates the minefield of Vietnamese fiction collections, for the most part. The book is small, almost pocket-able, and fairly bright yet still attractive. In short, it appears disarmingly approachable, not physically (and implicitly, emotionally) weighty, like *The Other Side of Heaven*—only 17 stories covering under 250 pages. (In an age of click-through web pages and red and silver book covers, negligence of

packaging is tantamount to commercial sin.) Editors John Balaban and Nguyen Qui Duc take a slightly variant approach to their selection. Their book highlights a cross-section of the best Vietnamese and Vietnamese American writers—a safer publishing move, perhaps, than publishing a single important (yet to an American audience, relatively unknown) international writer. And by publishing Vietnamese American writers as the compared, “known” entity, the book targets a known audience as well, the burgeoning market segment of Asian-American readers that has a presumed interest in recovering or maintaining its unique cultures. The metaphor of literary travel also serves the book well, distancing it from the prevalent expectation that Vietnamese literature will be Vietnam War literature. “We have avoided war stories,” the editors tell us in the preface. “We have also . . . avoided stories carrying heavy political freight.” Rather than the modern Vietnam, what we can expect to encounter in this collection, the editors tell us, are echoes of “the ancient habits of the ‘Three Religions,’ the Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism that laid claim to Vietnamese thinking long before the West arrived.” The editors establish their own criteria for judging the book, in effect. I think it’s fair to set the text against them.

The claim to avoid war stories is inaccurate, unless we narrowly define war stories as those that focally capture moments of armed conflict and destruction, and consider their direct causes and consequences. The war is the defining backdrop and impetus for “The Shelter.” On the one hand, the male protagonist cannot make human contact with a woman who craves to have sex with him, because he has not allowed the war to destroy what may have become obsolete values, namely his conviction of his hostess’s utter repulsiveness and his own worth. But she, Vieng, has been transformed into a monster by war—the bucktoothed and hulking tender of bodies and body parts, indelibly stained by human blood, fed and feeding others from the salvaged rucksacks of the dead. “A Small Tragedy” does indeed aspire to capture the epic dimensions of its classical Greek counterparts within the compressed space of a short story, and the past war serves as the catalyst for catastrophe. After we learn of Tuyen’s direct responsibility for the deaths of thousands of his comrades across several wartime incidents, and his abandonment of his first family, we strain at his morally incongruous prosperity garnered during wartime. We wait to see if some system of universal justice rights seemingly un-rightable wartime wrongs. “The Stranded Fish” should be read as a Vietnamese soldier’s parable, encouraging faithful service, though that service takes one to undesirable and isolated regions far from home for

indefinite periods. The bombing of a village levee precipitates the events of the fable-like “A River’s Mystery.” In “The Color of Sorrow,” the tensions between the Vietnamese and the Viet-Kieus (“sons and daughters from overseas”) can only be understood as a continuing consequence of the past war—“ . . . all the sorrow of a postwar nation, independent, but needing to please foreigners with money.” The war necessitates the abandonment of a treasured family shrine in “Dark Wood and Shadows.” The fortunes and standing of the namesake in “The Colonel” fall precipitously once conflict has ended—a *de facto* commentary. And in “How Long Until the End of Bitterness,” a widow’s loss is institutionalized by the state—Luu’s role as “wife of a fallen hero” prevents her from reestablishing another lasting adult relationship. These are the stories that reflect the direct influence of the war. We can argue indirect influence in others. Perhaps a more accurate editorial statement would be that although the war appears in many of the stories, they neither seek to interpret it, or aggrandize or vilify a side. War is simply a residual, shaping element, as integral to most of these writers’ worlds as nature itself.

We might even differ with the editors over the inherent political nature of some of these stories. Often anthologized, “The Goat’s Meat Special” is usually interpreted as either a straight comedy, or a comedy of manners. But it may also be read as political satire. The triumph over Westerners and capitalism brought, not equality and opportunity, but a more bureaucratic and pervasive system of graft. Seen at a proper angle, any one of us might be a grunting goat—capable of inordinately consuming, and of being consumed. And it’s difficult not to read “A Small Tragedy” as an implicit indictment of highly placed, seemingly immune Communist government officials, and a system that appears to nurture them. “The Color of Sorrow” is a less subdued testament of Western rapaciousness in Vietnam. “How Long until the End of Bitterness?” considers the cost of personal sacrifice for the good of the state. “The Colonel” raises the question of the state’s forgotten heroes. In a country that fought so long over ideas and ideals, I wouldn’t consider it a fault to raise political questions, even if the stories don’t answer them.

What arises most profoundly from this collection is its consummate artistry. I’m not familiar enough with the traditions of Taoism, Buddhism or Confucianism to recognize and distinguish them in the stories. But I tend to think that the cultural wealth and exchange between three religious and philosophical traditions translates readily into the array of narrative styles in this relatively small volume. The deceptively simple manner in which Nguyen Huy Thiep gradually strips the hunter Dieu of the trappings of his humanity—his

gun, his coat, and ultimately his clothes—while restoring his humane-ness through a growing sympathy for the wounded monkey he's tracking, makes this aphoristic tale one of the most beautiful I've read in quite some time. The editors deem another Thiep story, "Fired Gold," Borgesian in its structural and conceptual complexity. In yet another tale, "Remembrance of the Countryside," he weds the Hemingway-like diction of a peasant farm boy to the relational complexity reminiscent of pre-Soviet Russian novels. Ho Anh Thai's "The Goat Meat Special" has the surreal irreverence of a Soviet thaw Bulgakov novel, while Doan Qouc Sy's "The Stranded Fish" and Bao Ninh's "The River's Mystery" read like contemporary versions of traditional oral tales. And as I mentioned earlier, Le Minh Khue's "A Small Tragedy" brilliantly translates the tale of a governmentally privileged Vietnamese family into a classical tragedy.

The book does have its problems, however great its achievements. Perhaps the editors include too much of Thiep's work—four of the seventeen stories. And the last four stories of the book, in the "Remembrance" section, don't seem to fit well with the preceding stories. Perhaps I get this impression because most of the stories up to this point in the book seem inextricably evolved from the war that came before them. To look at the compelling present of those stories is to face the compelling past at the same time. The last four stories, because they don't arise necessarily from that wartime past, lack the starkness, the spareness of the earlier works. And the last story, ending in America at Christmas, seems to put a final, flattening stamp on the work (although the story would undoubtedly stand on its own when read without the rest of the book as its context).

Despite my minor criticisms, I still think *Vietnam: A Traveler's Literary Companion* just may be one of the best collections of Vietnamese and Vietnamese American short stories to date. I think the editors of the work successfully negotiate the traditional American hindrances to acceptance of unfamiliar literature. But more importantly, I think John Balaban and Nguyen Qui Duc arrive at the right combination of works, by and large. I personally think that if we were more familiar with literature of the Vietnamese, the majority of works in this collection would be much more widely anthologized. Perhaps the reprint of this book will help bring such exposure to these deserving artists.

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an Indiana University Bloomington fellow. He has published numerous poems and articles in such publications as **WLA**, the *African American Review*, *Wascana Review*, and *Writers' Forum*.