



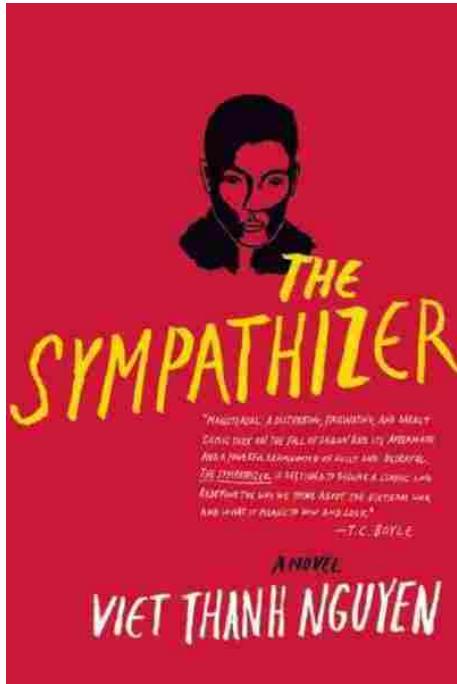
## AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

# A Dark, Funny — And Vietnamese — Look At The Vietnam War

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Heard on All Things Considered

NPR STAFF



## The Sympathizer

by Viet Thanh Nguyen

Paperback, 393 pages

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The Captain, a Communist sympathizer who's risen through the ranks of the South Vietnamese Army, has a confession:

I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds. I am not some misunderstood mutant from a comic book or a horror movie, although some have treated me as such. I am simply able to see any issue from both sides.

So begins Viet Thanh Nguyen's new novel, *The Sympathizer*.

Its publication comes 40 years to the month after the fall of Saigon ("or liberation ... depending on your point of view," Nguyen tells NPR's Arun Rath) in April 1975.

The book is written as a confession from the narrator's jail cell, recounting his post-war mission: to flee with the remnants of the South Vietnamese Army to the United States, and continue to spy on them. That mission takes the Captain to Los Angeles, to the Philippines to participate in the filming of an extravagant Vietnam War movie (sound familiar?), and back to Vietnam itself.

Nguyen is Vietnamese-American, and was just 4 years old when his family fled South Vietnam in 1975. He now studies ethnicity in America as a professor at the University of Southern California. The novel is rife with insight and criticism — and importantly in America, Nguyen tells Rath, the perspective of a Vietnamese person during and after the war.

*To hear their full conversation, click the audio link above.*

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## Interview highlights

### On the author's background



Viet Thanh Nguyen teaches English and American Studies at the University of Southern California.

*BeBe Jacobs/Courtesy of Grove Atlantic Publishing*

I was born in Vietnam and fled as a refugee in April of 1975 with my family to the United States. And even though I grew up as an American, deeply Americanized, this shadow of the war and of history hung over me, because I was constantly hearing stories about what had happened to the Vietnamese people from my parents or from the extended Vietnamese community that I was living in. And so I just absorbed that sense of a persistent memory, of persistent trauma, of this feeling that the war was not over, and that the country had been lost, and that we still hoped that one day we would take that country back.

### **On the Vietnam War in American movies**

When I was growing up in the 1980s, the idea that Hollywood was fighting the Vietnam War again, through all manner of popular movies that many people have

seen, was very important to me. Because I would go to these movies and on the one hand, I would identify with American soldiers [like Rambo] because I was an American moviegoer.

[Rambo] is an action hero. He's Sylvester Stallone. He's beautiful on screen. There's pleasure to be had in shooting big guns and showing off big muscles — until the moment when I realized, "Wait a minute, I'm also the gook on the screen being killed."

I remember sitting and watching *Platoon* in a movie theater, and when the Vietnamese were shot, people would cheer. I was like, "Wait, that's weird, who am I supposed to identify with at this moment?" ...

*Apocalypse Now* was a movie that was very important to me. I think I saw it when I was 10 or 11 years old, one of the early movies I saw on a VCR — [and it] totally traumatized me. My voice would shake even 10 years later describing a scene from the movie where the sailors massacre a *sanpan* full of Vietnamese civilians.

On the one hand, it's an incredible work of art. I think I admire that film. On the other hand, it puts me in a very difficult situation as the Vietnamese person who gets killed in the movie. ...

It's much better to be the villain and the anti-hero than to be the extra who gets killed. And that's what essentially is happening in American Vietnam War movies of the 1980s. Yes, they depict a very dark side of the American experience, but that also means that they cast Americans as the central subjects of history.

### **On whether the Captain's story is the great American story**

He has to come here and remake himself. And actually, part of the story is that he first came to the States in the '60s as a foreign exchange student. And this is where his love affair with America begins. So he's certainly aware of all these issues about being a part of the American dream, of pulling yourself up by the bootstraps, of reinventing yourself in America in a completely new fashion.

He's infatuated with all those things, but he's deeply skeptical of them at the same time. Because he's absolutely cognizant that all of this narrative of the American self-

transformation is partially what justified the American intervention in Vietnam, and partially how Americans saw themselves in Vietnam.

viet thanh nguyen    vietnam war