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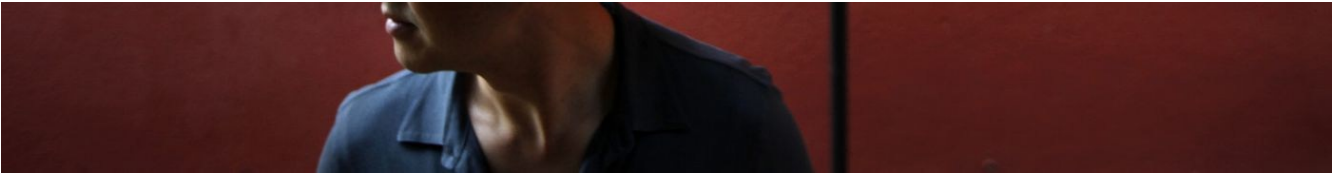


Viet Thanh Nguyen wins the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for 'The Sympathizer'



By CAROLYN KELLOGG
APR 18, 2016 | 1:39 PM





Viet Thanh Nguyen won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel "The Sympathizer." (Bob Chamberlin / Los Angeles Times)



Viet Thanh Nguyen took the Pulitzer Prize in fiction Monday for his debut novel, "The Sympathizer," published by Grove Press. Nguyen, a professor at the USC, is one of the L.A. Times' 10 critics at large.

"Thanks for all your good wishes," Nguyen wrote on Facebook. "I double checked with real people in my publisher's office...and they say that The Sympathizer really did win the Pulitzer Prize. Unless this is some cosmic virtual reality trick. I'm stunned."



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Reached by phone in Boston, where he would be giving a reading later Monday night, Nguyen expressed surprise and delight. He had no plans to break out the champagne until after his reading was concluded.



The Pulitzer committee lauded "The Sympathizer" as "a layered immigrant tale told in the wry, confessional voice of a 'man of two minds' -- and two countries, Vietnam and the United States."



Nguyen, who lives in Los Angeles, was born in Vietnam; his family came to the U.S. as refugees in 1975. "The Sympathizer" which follows a wickedly smart double-agent for

refugees in 1975. "The Sympathizer," which follows a formerly smart double agent for South Vietnam, begins at the end of the Vietnam War, moves to Southern California and eventually winds up on a film set not unlike "Apocalypse Now." Part thriller, part political satire, "The Sympathizer" is sharp-edged fiction.



Nguyen cited prior Pulitzer wins by Jhumpa Lahiri and Toni Morrison as being significant to him. "Certainly when Jhumpa Lahiri won for 'Interpreter of Maladies' it was huge for any of us working in Asian American literature," he said, admitting that's one of many ways to classify her short story collection. "When that happened, it was such a landmark for those of us who are writers of color and Asian American writers."

He says he admired the choice "to give it to Toni Morrison [for 'Beloved'] who is not just a writer but a thinker. She's absolutely uncompromising in her aesthetic, and so articulate about why she makes certain kinds of decisions in her writing... her claim that she writes literature for black people first and foremost. That was always my aspiration too – to

write for an audience of people who are intimate to me, and not to think that I was writing for a white audience first."

Nguyen explained, "The book is confession from one Vietnamese person to another – it was always designed to be addressed to Vietnamese people – anyone else who's reading they are not the intended audience, at least not in the novel. I thought I was writing the book for myself, but to reach a larger audience it would have to speak to multiple audiences – from the feedback I've received, they've responded very positively to the book too."



Talking to the Times in 2015, Nguyen explained his perspective in creating the character. "You have a much happier life if you just see things from one point of view. You have no ambiguity," he says. The protagonist of "The Sympathizer" -- who goes unnamed throughout the book -- has to see two sides, constantly judging others and himself in a moral morass.



It's important that the Pulitzer committee recognized a work of fiction from Los Angeles, set in locations on the Pacific Rim. "We are a Pacific-facing country as much as an Atlantic-facing one," Nguyen told The Times. "Literary culture needs to recognize that diversity."

Nguyen's latest book is the nonfiction study "Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War," published earlier this month by Harvard University Press. He is at work on a sequel to "The Sympathizer."

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Carolyn Kellogg



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