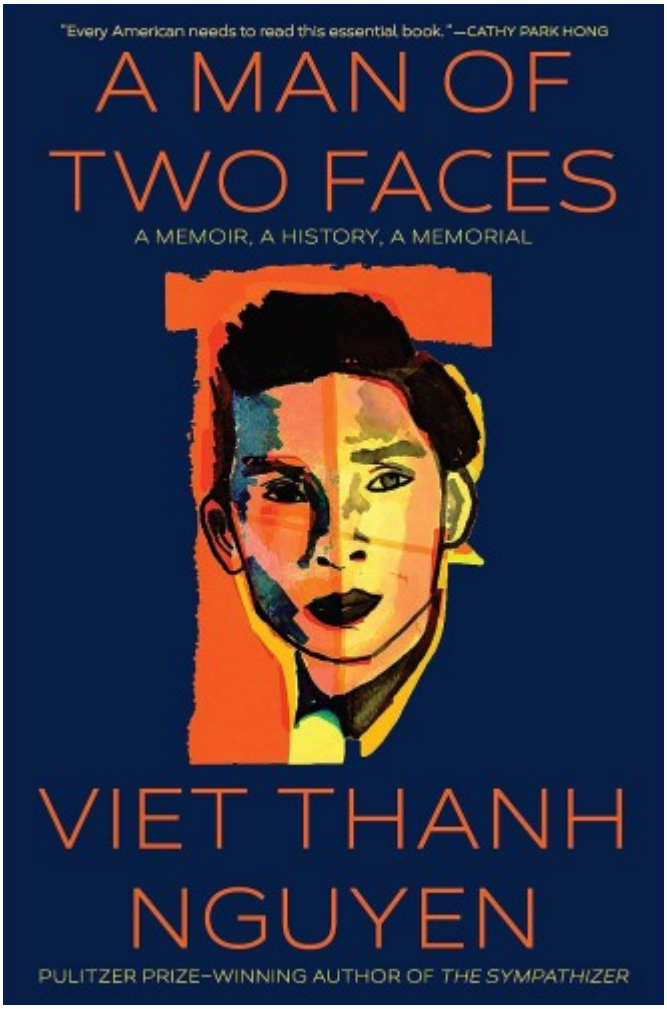
A refugee’s fragmented memory

Viet Thanh Nguyen’s fractured and stirring memoir is haunted by war—and religion.

by Colton Bernasol in the May 2024 issue

In Review



A Man of Two Faces

A Memoir, a History, a Memorial

By Viet Thanh Nguyen
Grove Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

In the provinces of the Philippines, my grandpa, a tenant farmer and peasant, is walking home when he is mugged by distant family members. They stab him multiple times, steal his money, and leave him to die.

When I try to remember how my father tells this story, I recollect the account differently each time. In one version it is midday; in another it is evening. Are they in the woods? Perhaps a stream of water flows by with a gentle and consistent hum? Does my grandpa fight back? I ask my dad to retell the story, yet each time I do, the peculiar details fall away before the ambiguous loss that echoes down generations. I reconstruct the story in my head, the truth of the event intact, with details lost to speculation.

It is this kind of fragmented memory that Viet Thanh Nguyen, Pulitzer Prize–winning author of the novel *The Sympathizer*, brings to *A Man of Two Faces*. Part memoir, part prose poetry, part social criticism, this book of refracted yet united forms retraces Nguyen's life: from his birth in Buôn Mê Thuột, to life in a small house off a highway in San Jose, California, to a writing seminar with the esteemed and groundbreaking Asian American writer Maxine Hong Kingston, to the eve of his mother's death as he stands near her and offers a final "I love you."

Like so many writers who are on the underside of privilege, Nguyen faces the perennial challenge of writing against society's stereotypes. Hollywood is especially at fault in the representation of Vietnamese people, with films like *Apocalypse Now* and *The Green Berets* depicting the horrors of the Vietnam War and projecting what seems to be an eternal image of the Vietnamese as either helpless victims or warmongering terrorists. These representations are buttressed by the history of the United States, including its involvement in the Vietnam War but also the anti-Asian rhetoric of President Trump during the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise in anti-Asian violence in recent years. In this context, the humanity of Vietnamese people is too easily lost, and the challenge to give an account of their actual lives is heightened.

Nguyen's story begins with Ba Má—his father and mother—who are pulled into the Vietnam War as civilians, remade into refugees, and positioned to navigate the complexities of American life in the war's wake. For much of the memoir, he centers Má, showing a complex woman who slept under a bus seat as a child, made a

difficult decision about which children to leave behind when fleeing the war, courageously faced down a gunman attempting to rob the family, and struggled with mental illness while doing her best to love her sons and daughter. For Nguyen, his mother is “a hero but not a soldier,” with a life worthy of representation that would not have been remembered if he did not tell it. “Civilian stories can be war stories, too,” and they deserve to be told.

Past and present unfold into each other as Nguyen makes himself an object of his attention, asking of his life, “When does memory begin?” The answer he gives is laced with self-doubt. When Nguyen recounts the leading moments that made his family refugees—when soldiers from the north invade his hometown—his mood is speculative. Perhaps he saw his adopted sister left behind, crying; perhaps Má carried him as they walked hundreds of kilometers to Nha Trang. He describes a memory of soldiers shooting at a boat full of refugees. But this, his brother says, didn’t happen. War’s violence renders the past foggy, and memory is all but severed from certainty.

Religion, like war, haunts the memoir. The US operation that led to some 100,000 Southeast Asian refugees coming to the United States was called “New Life.” Nguyen’s parents are devout Roman Catholics who expect their son to follow in their footsteps: to believe in God, attend mass, and assent to the sacraments. But Nguyen cannot. He is an atheist. His only faith, he writes, is justice, an immanent vision of human flourishing and community across national boundaries that is juxtaposed with the heaven of his parent’s faith.

And yet, when Nguyen describes a political vision of freedom grounded in his experience of being a refugee—a freedom that is internationalist, inclusive, and knows no bounds—I am reminded of the Christian faith he rejects. “As refugees, we came from that / terrifying void between nations / where we were cast out,” reflects Nguyen. He carries on,

> Rather than despising the refugees who come with nothing and are nothing, we could identify with them and their nothingness, a blankness from which we can imagine a world free from the forces that negate all of us—exploitation and violence, fear and terror, greed and selfishness.

To me, this passage echoes a claim central to my own faith. I take it that the theological revolution at the heart of Jewish and Christian faith is that God must be

imagined through refugee life.

Israel’s own community is, according to Exodus, made into refugees who wander between nations in a wilderness that amounts to nothing. Jesus’ own life begins like Nguyen’s, on the run because of the violence of the state. And this refugee Jew drew on Israel’s faith traditions to enact Nguyen’s political—perhaps theological?—hope: a world free from the forces that negate us all. This makes me wonder if there is more shared between the faith of Nguyen’s parents and his faith. Could they be different languages for the same reality?

When I finished reading this stirring memoir, I thought of my grandpa, and the fact that I have no memory of him but through the broken memories of others. Can I memorialize my grandpa’s life too, whose story now resides in a past haunted by traumatized ambivalence? After reading Nguyen’s memoir, I am encouraged to try.