

Viet Thanh Nguyen: Nothing is Resolved

by Jeff Goldberg

He was only four when his parents fled Vietnam for America in 1975, and he has few memories of the war. But the Vietnam War and its personal, political, and emotional toll is at the heart of novelist and social critic Viet Thanh Nguyen's work. Nguyen serves up the existential despair left behind by the war as black comedy, but the torn lives and shattered beliefs he depicts are deadly serious. His 2015 Pulitzer-prize winning *The Sympathizer* and its sequel *The Committed* follow the misadventures of a nameless protagonist on a futile search for identity from the expatriate Vietnamese community in Los Angeles, to a Hollywood set of a Vietnam War movie, a Communist North Vietnamese reeducation camp, and the criminal underworld of Paris. A third novel is in the works, along with a memoir, and an HBO series based on *The Sympathizer*. As a writer, Viet Thanh Nguyen defies categorization. His books are comic, tragic, ribald, poignant, and often so enigmatic his work has been compared to a Zen koan. That's where we began our conversation when I reached him at home in Los Angeles.

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At the end of *The Sympathizer*, the hero has an epiphany when he says he “became enlightened,” and it's a single word: “Nothing.” It reminds me of the Zen koan in which Master Chao-chou replies to a monk's question with the word “Mu!”—meaning “no” or “not.” Were you aware of the Buddhist parallels as you wrote those scenes?

I was aware that when the narrator is enlightened by the word nothing it echoed the Buddhist concept of emptiness. But I wasn't raised a Buddhist, I was raised a Catholic and have very limited understanding of what that actually means in Buddhist teaching.

In your next book *The Committed*, you riff on the word “nothing” until it becomes a kind of mantra. What do all these nothings mean?

I'm not sure the idea can ever really be satisfactorily articulated or explained—and that's the point. On the one hand, you have the inevitability of nothing, death, and the great terrifying mystery confronting us all. On the other hand, as a writer I'm confronted with the nothingness of the blank page. For me, nothingness generates narrative. When faced with what we don't know we tell stories to try to make sense out of what has happened and what will happen to us. Religions and ideologies—Catholicism and Communism in my novels—offer their believers narratives of faith to confront and resolve this. My books are about how you can't resolve it.

Your hero is left with nothing because he's lost his faith.

He loses his faith in Catholicism and finds a substitute in Communism, and then loses his faith in that. The only resolution is an unfinished resolution.

Can writing about what's unresolvable help you resolve it?

I have a belief as a writer that somehow language can save me if I can just write a beautiful enough sentence or construct a sufficient kind of a story. And yet, there's always an insufficiency with writing. The work is never finished—the problem I'm trying to solve with my words is always going to be irresolvable.

Do you think of writing as a practice?

I do. It's a practice that requires discipline, sacrifice, and long-term commitment. I write out of a deep need within myself for beauty. A beauty that I think can only be found through the practice, through the sacrifice over time that's required.

Is writing your path to liberation?

I'm a professor at the University of Southern California, so in that sense, when I'm writing I'm free from the constraints of having to teach, and grade, and do service work, all the responsibilities of being a professor. But I hope that, in a small way at least, my novels are also liberating in a collective sense.

Your writing is very funny, which can also be liberating. Do you laugh out loud at lines you've written?

It sounds a little self-indulgent to say that I laugh at my own jokes, but I do. It was fun to write *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed*. Given my Catholic upbringing, it's fun to be naughty and write about sex and make jokes about priests. It's also liberating to be satirical and naughty about secular power in the form of revolutions, governments, and states.

When you write do you get into the “zone,” where the work is flowing and you're totally absorbed in what you're doing, unconscious of the world outside?

That's part of the joy of writing, but it doesn't happen without pain and suffering. At least for me it didn't. It took twenty years of mostly pure misery before I wrote *The Sympathizer*. I kept at it in the stubborn hope that one day I'd reach a point where I'd feel greater accomplishment and pleasure in writing, and that turned out to be true. Writing *The Sympathizer* was two years of ecstasy. I was in my room, I didn't have to teach, my wife was the only person I was in communication with. I wrote every day, and every day was wonderful. I'd be laughing to myself as I wrote and just taking sheer pleasure in the construction of sentences and the story I was telling. I haven't had that kind of experience with writing since then.

Why not?

After the success of *The Sympathizer*, my solitary cell was constantly being interrupted by other people and demands. I had to be out in the world. And that's fine. I need both. I need the world to

teach me with all its pain, suffering, and distraction; and I need solitude in order to turn what I've learned into writing.

The only overt reference to Buddhism in your novels is a character in *The Committed* who says that Thich Quang Duc the monk who immolated himself during the Vietnam War was a hoax.

I once heard my sister-in-law say something like that—that he was on drugs and being manipulated by the Communists. She's deeply anti-Communist and those rumors exist in the anti-Communist Vietnamese community.

Thich Nhat Hahn wrote a letter to Martin Luther King defending self-immolation as a form of nonviolent protest. How do you react to that?

When Thich Quang Duc immolated himself in 1963, it was a nonviolent protest. But it was also seen as a deeply political protest, which, whether intended or not, incited those kinds of hostile responses.

Do you think you'll explore Buddhism more in your writing?

I'd love to incorporate Buddhism more explicitly in the new novel I'm writing—to have a Thich Nhat Hanh-like figure in it to represent the Buddhist experience. But, because I don't know enough about Buddhism, my fear would be misinterpreting what someone like Thich Nhat Hanh represents—something I don't understand with the same intimacy that I understand Communism and Catholicism.

The hero in *The Sympathizer* is a spy. Do you ever feel like a spy?

I grew up in the United States in a household where my parents told me we were a hundred percent Vietnamese, and yet I felt very American. But among Americans, I felt very Vietnamese and knew that I was looked at as an outsider. So, I felt like I was an American

spying on people in the Vietnamese community, and a Vietnamese spying on Americans outside the community. Growing up I was always very quiet, not outspoken, always an observer, watching people and listening to what they were saying. I still sometimes feel like I'm deliberately spying on people when I'm collecting material for my novels.

That skill must come in handy for writer.

There's definitely an alignment between the writer and the spy.

