

We the People Book Club

THE SYMPATHIZER

Reading Guide

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

"INTELLIGENT, RELENTLESSLY PACED, AND SAVAGELY FUNNY."

— WALL STREET JOURNAL (BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR)



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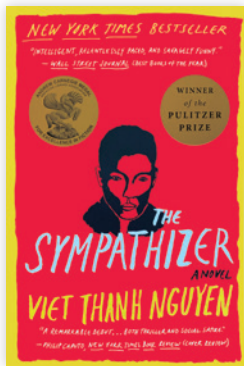


THE
SYMPATHIZER
A NOVEL

VIET THANH NGUYEN

"A REMARKABLE DEBUT... BOTH THRILLER AND SOCIAL SATIRE."

— PHILIP CAPUTO, NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW (COVER REVIEW)



This We the People Book Club selection explores *The Sympathizer* (Grove Press) by **VIET THANH NGUYEN**, a novel that is significant for a number of reasons. It is a page-turner with a definitively literary sensibility, a spy novel that doubles as a treatise on American culture and a philosophical reflection on the dynamics of power. More importantly in its context as an achievement in United States popular culture, *The Sympathizer* offers a Vietnamese refugee's perspective on the Vietnam War, a period in history Americans remember almost exclusively through their own narrow perspective; in the U.S., "Vietnam" is almost always a metonym for "The Vietnam War." One of the achievements of *The Sympathizer* is its power to remove this limitation in the American imagination, to restore "Vietnam" to its full meaning: a country, a people's home with a people's history.

The Sympathizer won a basketful of awards after its publication in 2015, among them the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction from the American Library Association, and the First Novel Prize from the Center for Fiction. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016), Nguyen's nonfiction counterpart to *The Sympathizer*, was a finalist for both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. In addition, Nguyen has recently received fellowships from the Guggenheim and MacArthur Foundations.

About This Book Club Reading Guide

Researched and written by Julia Davis (a 2018-2019 Fellow with the Practicing Democracy Project), this guide includes background on Viet Thanh Nguyen, an overview of *The Sympathizer*, and observations on the author's literary style. For your personal exploration and/or discussion with others in your book club, we include commentary on three themes: identity, representation, and power. Questions within each will facilitate three approaches to the work: (1) your interpretation of the text, (2) your personal reflections inspired by your reading, and (3) practices for you to try that animate the novel's democratic values. The guide also includes ideas for further exploration; you might decide to engage these resources before or after your discussion.

Background

Born in South Vietnam in 1971, **Viet Thanh Nguyen** fled with his parents after the fall of Saigon. In 1975, they arrived at a refugee camp in Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, where each member of his family had to be sponsored for American citizenship. Since there was no one able to sponsor the family together, they were split up; Nguyen says that this is where his memory begins: at four years old, being taken away from his parents to live with the white family that was sponsoring him.

Eventually the Nguyen family moved to San Jose, California, seeking better opportunities. Nguyen attended the University of California at Berkeley through his PhD, which was in English. After Berkeley, Nguyen took a job at the University of Southern California, where he still works today. At USC, Nguyen serves as the Aeryl Arnold Chair of English, and as a Professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity, and Comparative Literature.

Nguyen's recent works include the short story collection *The Refugees* and the nonfiction collection *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*, which he edited. In addition to devoting his literary efforts to the articulation of the refugee experience, Nguyen actively supports Vietnamese art and culture throughout the diaspora as co-director of **The Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network** (DVAN). DVAN organizes events that encourage, highlight, and support the work of Vietnamese writers, filmmakers, and artists.

Overview

The novel follows the precarious life of an unnamed Captain in the South Vietnamese secret police who is actually a mole, a spy working for the North Vietnamese Communists. As Saigon is falling, the Captain gets orders from another agent, his best friend Man, to accompany the General as he, his family, and close associates flee to the United States. His task is to stay close to the General and other refugees in whose hearts the war is not over and report on any plans to mount a resistance. In the States, he works for an orientalist Department Chair who regularly essentializes him and a movie director who "accidentally" blows him up after arguments about the representation of Vietnamese natives in the film. Eventually, the Captain returns to Vietnam with the General's makeshift regiment; there, North Vietnamese soldiers ambush him and his other best friend, Bon, and send them to a reeducation camp where the Captain must write a confession, which is the novel.

Genre, Language, and Structure

The Sympathizer is a novel in the form of a confession to The Commandant in a reeducation camp, though it is easy to forget this as the story unfolds. The Captain refers to his literary task at the beginning of some of the chapters, but otherwise this conceit does not interrupt the flow of the narrative. Nonetheless, it is actually important to keep in mind that the prose we are reading is supposed to be a *confession* to a *communist* leader; the confession's effectiveness *as confession* becomes a source of tension in the novel's final quarter.

Nguyen's language moves up and down the registers: often he is the biting social critic; sometimes he is soft, vulnerable, even sentimental. You will find a penetrating analysis of the refugee experience followed by laugh-out-loud one-liners. The word that most characterizes his narrative style, though, is playful: he relishes a good metaphor and pushes language to its limit. The pleasure he takes in writing, and especially in inventing new ways to say and see things, is unmistakable.

But Nguyen knows that being carried by a sea of words is only joyous when one can trust that all those words are doing work for the story, so he matches playfulness with precision. *The Sympathizer* requires a careful reading, especially during the climax of the story when, meaningfully, the perspective shifts (from first- to third-person) and pronouns transform from "I" to "him" to "we."

Like many other postmodern novels, *The Sympathizer* uses time flexibly: the novel progresses with frequent shifts to various points in the past that illuminate the complexity of the Captain's character and motivation. It also experiments with graphic conventions, most notable the erasure of quotation marks to demarcate the beginning and end of dialogue.

Themes

Identity

The very first sentence of the novel opens the theme of personal identity, in particular the difficulty the narrator has in being whole, consistent — in other words, being what we call “a self” in the world: “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. Sometimes I flatter myself that this is a talent, and although it is admittedly one of a minor nature, it is perhaps also the sole talent I possess. At other times when I reflect on how I cannot help but observe the world in such a fashion, I wonder if what I have should even be called a talent. After all, a talent is something you use, not something that uses you. The talent you cannot use, the talent that possesses you — is a hazard, I must confess. But in the months when this confession begins, my way of seeing the world still seemed more of a virtue than a danger, which is how some dangers first appear.”

The Captain's identity is multiply complex, and his role as a spy, a man wearing a South Vietnamese mask over his communist face, is the least of it. In fact, it is the in-betweenness into which he was born that makes him fit to be a spy. He was born in the North but made to flee the Communists with his mother when he was nine, settling in the South. With an (absent) European father and Vietnamese mother, the narrator was delivered a biracial bastard into a society that has no official place for this either-or/neither-nor identity. Considered neither Vietnamese nor European in his home country, he cannot marry.

Cut off from the possibility of respectability and family, he lives mostly as a political and professional being, although even in these realms his sense of self is contradictory: on the surface he is a supporter of the Republican South and an ally of the Americans; deep inside, under the mask he wears as a spy, he is a communist working for the revolution. This split is more authentic than performative, however, and the metaphor of a mask is too simple to get at the Captain's deep complexity: “Most actors spent more time with their masks off than on, whereas in my case it was the reverse. No surprise, then, that sometimes I dreamed of trying to pull a mask off my face, only to realize that the mask was my face.” The Captain is not just *acting* as if he sympathizes with the West. As he will fully realize in the reeducation camp, he is unable to take a hard line against American capitalism, so that even though he has devoted his life to the revolution, the revolutionaries find him, and his confession, suspicious. He is in between in his political identity as well — and the world is a dangerous place for someone unwilling or unable to choose sides.

The Captain's inability to *not* see the world from at least two perspectives comes to him honestly; it is a positive and essential part of his identity, not a free choice, even though sometimes, weary of the difficulty it presents, even he slips into the world's reductionist thinking: "While I chose to live two lives and be a man of two minds, it was hard not to, given how people have always called me a bastard. Our country itself was cursed, bastardized, partitioned into North and South" In a way, the bastard, biracial Captain is more Vietnamese than any other character: like his beloved home, he is split, and neither the ideology of the South nor the North can make him feel at home as long as he is made to choose.

For all their irreconcilable differences, the communists and the capitalists have this in common: the need to fix any shifting identities. The Commandant's power over the captain makes his insistence on consistency and unity particularly threatening, but the demands he makes on the captain's identity are no different than those made by the Department Chair. The Chair symbolizes not so much a type of American but a particularly American way of thinking and being, common both in and out of the academy, a mentality that surfaces particularly in interactions with women and minorities. This way of thinking is the assumption that one can know another and explain that other to the other. We might simply call this arrogance or mansplaining, but it is worth being more specific. The mentality may express itself as a faith in science, knowledge, and study, but it arises out of a belief in one's cultural, racial, or gendered superiority.

Nguyen gets much good humor from parodying the white, male, "educated" arrogance of the Department Chair who tells the Captain who he is as "an oriental," explains to him his identity crisis, and treats him like a patient in a cultural experiment: the crucial study of whether, as an Eurasian, the Captain can adapt to the West better than Asians born without the "help" of a white parent: "You embody the symbiosis of Orient and Occident, the possibility that out of two can come one. ... You must assiduously cultivate those reflexes that Americans have learned innately, in order to counterweigh your Oriental instincts." Simplifying and reducing his sense of self is the Captain's ticket into American success, just as it is his ticket out of the reeducation camp.

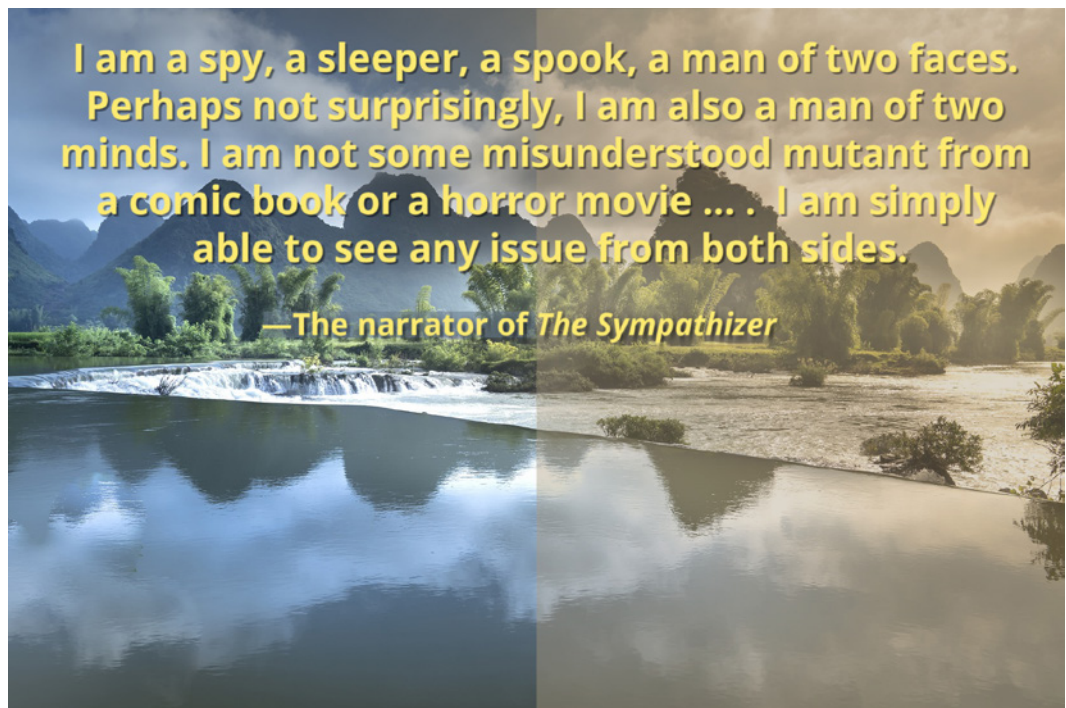
Crucially, the Chair represents the equal parts of power and fear in the admixture that is assimilation. While there is the assumption that American culture is superior and ought to be submitted to, there is also the fear that "Asian" culture (the Chair, like most Americans, makes no distinctions here) is more powerful as a factor in identity. According to the Chair, the Captain's success at assimilating will inspire the final assimilation of the American-born Asian, that tragic figure who feels "forever homeless, a stranger, a foreigner, no matter how many generations lived on the soil of Judeo-Christian culture, never able to do away with the Confucian residue of his ancient, noble heritage ..."

The novel's ending reflections move our thoughts from the particulars of the Captain's identity towards a more universal understanding of the complexities of identity. And we begin to see that simplifying people's ways of identifying and their thoughts and beliefs is a political project, and that it is the embrace of complexity that is the truly revolutionary act. In the clarity after his torture, the Captain summarizes his so-called contradictions: "... just as my abused generation was divided before birth, so was

I divided on birth, delivered into a postpartum world where hardly anyone accepted me for who I was, but only ever bullied me into choosing between my two sides. This was not simply hard to do — no, it was truly impossible, for how could I choose me against myself? Now my friend would release me from this small world with its small-minded people, those mobs who treated a man with two minds and two faces as a freak, who wanted only one answer for any question.”

Just pages later, the Captain has another realization, only this time about Man, whose name here has a double purpose, in that the Captain is realizing something about Man and about man, humankind: “He was the commissar but he was also Man; he was my interrogator but also my only confidant; he was the fiend who had tortured me but also my friend. Some might say I was seeing things, but the true optical illusion was in seeing others and oneself as undivided and whole ...”

Thus, the novel’s commentary on the Captain’s identity becomes a philosophical inquiry into the true nature of human identity. If even the most adamant communist, the commissar, cannot be reduced without violence to his character, neither can we. We are all of two minds, and yet we live in a world fueled by our willingness to be flattened and simplified.



Discussion: Identity

THINK

1. What do you make of the shift to the pronoun “we” after the commissar has broken the Captain and he has correctly answered the question about independence and freedom? Is this simply a sign of the Captain’s “reunification” of body and soul after the out-of-body experience of being tortured? Or does it represent an acceptance of the complexities of his identity, a full embrace of the dual identity with which he first introduced himself to the reader? Alternately, could it be symbolic of his identification with a collective identity over against a more Western individualistic identity? Which of these possibilities makes the most sense and how does each reflect a different meaning for the novel?

REFLECT

2. Walt Whitman famously wrote, “Do I contradict myself? / Very well, then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” Reflect on the contradictions within your character, your beliefs, your actions. When do these feel like tension and when do they feel like release? What role do other people play in this tension and/or release?

PRACTICE

3. We tend to make judgments about another person’s identity or character based on qualities that are obvious rather than qualities that are valuable. When we do so we flatten people, and when we flatten people, we flatten life itself! I once read a quote by a blind woman who celebrated that she was not inhibited by sight. There is such truth in this! We use our eyes to make assumptions that then frame how we relate to people. But we can practice seeing differently. Try this when you are distracted by the tone of someone’s voice, by their physical appearance, by their reputation, etc.: as you listen, see their words. Imagine them printed on a page so that you concentrate purely on what the person is saying rather than on how they are saying it, who is saying it, or what they have said before. Of course, context is important when it helps us listen and understand, but if the person’s “situatedness” is interfering with your ability to listen and see them as they want to be heard and seen, try abstracting out the words from all physicality and history, as if you are reading an article by someone you don’t know.

Representation

The simplification of one’s identity is *personally* frustrating and even threatening in one-on-one interactions such as those between the Captain and the Department Chair and the Captain and the Commandant. However, when a group in power assumes to represent the identity of another group with less power, the simplification becomes downright dangerous. An entire people — a complex, diverse nation or ethnicity — can be dehumanized. Nguyen explores this danger through the Captain’s consultancy on *The Hamlet*, the Auteur’s film about what Americans call “Vietnam,” meaning the American Armed forces’ involvement in the Vietnam War.

The theoretical basis for Nguyen’s exploration of the problem of representation comes from Karl Marx; the General summarizes Marx’s comments: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.’ Isn’t that what’s happening here? Marx refers

to peasants but he may as well refer to us. We cannot represent ourselves. Hollywood represents us. So we must do what we can to ensure that we are represented well.”

The Captain does what he can, which is very little compared to the Hollywood machine symbolized by the Auteur. It is in America, in Hollywood, that the Captain learns the difference between hard power and soft power: “His arrogance marked something new in the world, for this was the first war where the losers would write history instead of the victors, courtesy of the most efficient propaganda machine ever created.”

The Americans had fled Vietnam, overpowered by the military prowess of the North Vietnamese, but America retained the power of representation, the power to “herd” the Vietnamese “into the roles of the poor, the innocent, the evil, or the corrupt. Our fate was not to be merely mute; we were to be struck dumb.”

The Auteur claims to be interested in authenticity but ultimately to serve the higher power of art, in whose name he rejects most of the Captain’s script notes. As the powerful agent in this scenario, the Auteur does not have to acknowledge his role as a propagandist or ever experience the disadvantages of erasing a people’s humanity. As the powerless consultant, the Captain knows that “Art cannot be separated from politics, and politics needed art in order to reach the people where they lived, through entertaining them. ... An audience member might love or hate this Movie, or dismiss it as only a story, but those emotions were irrelevant. What mattered was that the audience member, having paid for the ticket, was willing to let American ideas and values seep into the vulnerable tissue of his brain and the absorbent soil of his heart.”

The Auteur can represent the Vietnamese people however he wants because he owns the means of representation. His disregard for the Captain’s expertise, however, reveals an even more fundamental truth: The American people do not care how the Vietnamese people are represented. The Captain points out that “the lack of speaking parts for Vietnamese people in a movie set in Vietnam might be interpreted as cultural insensitivity. True, Violet interjected, but what it boils down to is who pays for the tickets and goes to the movies. Frankly, Vietnamese audiences aren’t going to watch this movie, are they? I contained my outrage. Even so, I said, do you not think it might be a little more believable, a little more realistic, a little more authentic, for a movie set in a certain country for the people in that country to have something to say, instead of having your screenplay direct, as it does now, *Cut to villagers speaking in their own language?* Do you think it might not be decent to let them actually say something instead of simply acknowledging that there is some kind of sound coming from their mouths? ...

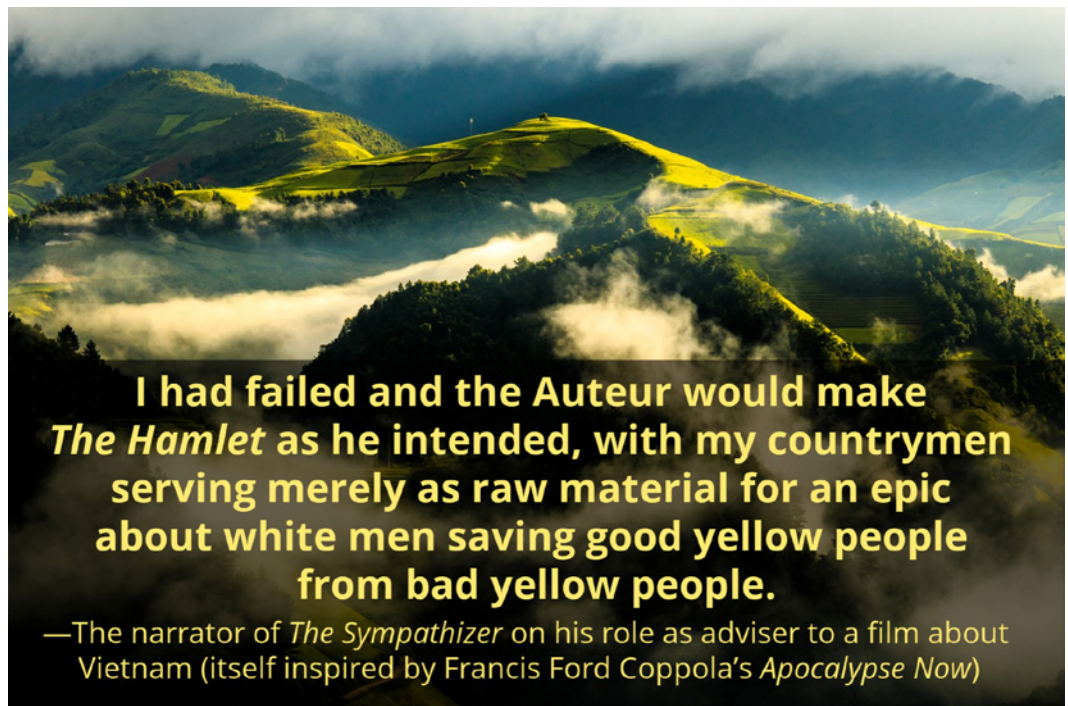
“The Auteur grimaced and said, Very interesting. Great stuff. Loved it, but I had a question. What was it. Oh, yes. How many movies have you made. None. ... Now get the hell out of my house and come back after you’ve made a movie or two. Maybe then I’ll listen to one or two of your cheap ideas.”

Essentially, the only way to effect change in the mode of representation is to prove oneself successful in the *marketing* of ideas. If one can accomplish this, then the only way to get speaking parts, much less complex human characters, for Vietnamese (or Asian) actors is to mold a ticket-buying public that cares to see the humanity of others — a difficult task in wartime (and it’s always wartime).

The explosion that nearly kills the Captain may have been accidental in impact, but it was purposeful in intent. Having questioned the ethics of the Auteur's artistic license, the Captain is "defined" in the most violent way by the very machinery he is trying to resist. On his way back to the States, the Captain "spent the entire time brooding over the problem of representation. Not to own the means of production can lead to premature death, but not to own the means of representation is also a kind of death. For if we are represented by others, might they not, one day, hose our deaths off memory's laminated floor?"

This question is rhetorical but not exactly hypothetical. Consider the film *Apocalypse Now* by Francis Ford Coppola, presumably the model for the Auteur. Americans consider this to be a film about Vietnam, which is to say a film about the Vietnam War, and it has exerted a lot of influence over our memory of the war. But *Apocalypse Now* is a film about America and American heroes in which the Vietnamese function as either enemies or scenery. The lives of the "evil" Viet Cong, who threaten "our boys" don't matter, and the lives of the innocent are barely present as human. This is a slippery, laminated floor, at best.

He who owns the representation owns history and controls who is human and worthy of sympathy. *The Sympathizer* punctures the seal of American control over the story of Vietnam, giving us complex characters who love their home and want it back (whatever that means to each of them). We can help ensure that the puncturing of this seal leads to a great vacuum, and that the space of representational power becomes filled with multiple perspectives.



Discussion: Representation

THINK

1. *The Sympathizer* represents the refugee and immigrant experience in a way that complicates the idea of the American Dream and a “better life.” Identify and discuss the passage that most powerfully corrected an assumption you had made about the hopes and dreams of refugees or immigrants.

2. Can you turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of your race, ethnicity, or national identity widely represented? In what ways are you represented — is there diversity here? Is someone of your race or ethnicity ever portrayed by someone who is not of that race or ethnicity? Why do you think this is or is not the case? (Adapted from Peggy McIntosh’s seminal work **“White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”**)

REFLECT

3. Stereotypes still govern how Asians and Asian Americans are represented in media, but in general Asian Americans have been less politically active than other minorities, so this misrepresentation does not get the attention it deserves. Consider following *The Love Life of an Asian Guy* on Facebook to engage in issues of Asian representation in American media.

PRACTICE

4. Internalize the Captain’s critique of the way the “natives” are represented in *The Hamlet*. Maintain it as part of the lens through which you see the world. Call out dehumanizing representations when you see them.

Power

“Power corrupts” is more than a cliché when that power bears down and threatens your life, your nation, and your ideals all at once. This is the reality at the heart of the revolution the Captain and Man have given their time, their talents, and their hopes to. It is a crushing reality that the liberating power of revolution devolves into the oppressing power of governance.

The Captain has his first misgivings about the communists’ ability to rule justly when, in America, he hears reports about abuse and the numbers of people fleeing; he writes to Man, whose pat response is, *“Enemies of the party must be rooted out.”* Soon enough, the Captain himself is treated like an enemy of the people, a victim of the regime’s paranoia and obsession with total power. Heartbroken and confused, the Captain learns painful lessons about concentrated power, one of them delivered by a most unlikely but reputable source, the commissar himself, Man, who confesses: “But the committees and the commissars do not care about remaking these prisoners. Everyone knows this and no one will say it aloud. All the jargon that the cadres spout only hides an awful truth ... Now that we are the powerful, we don’t need the French or the Americans to fuck us over. We can fuck ourselves just fine.”

The Captain realizes that the communists have become like the imperialists from whom they sought to liberate Vietnam: “I understood, at last, how our revolution had

gone from being the vanguard of political change to the rearguard hoarding power. In this transformation, we were not unusual. Hadn't the French and the Americans done exactly the same? Once revolutionaries themselves, they had become imperialists, colonizing and occupying our defiant little land, taking away our freedom in the name of saving us. Our revolution took considerably longer than theirs, and was considerably bloodier, but we made up for lost time. When it came to learning the worst habits of our French masters and their American replacements, we quickly proved ourselves the best. We, too, could abuse grand ideals! Having liberated ourselves in the name of Independence and freedom — I was so tired of saying these words! — we then deprived our defeated brethren of the same."

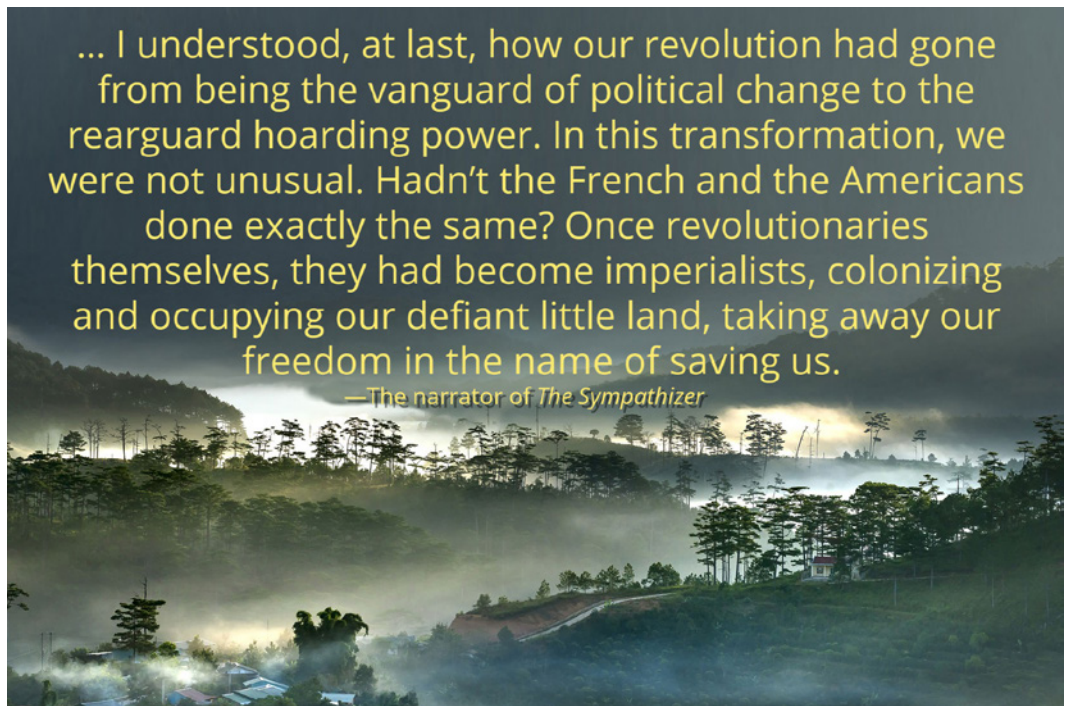
Can war, which necessitates division, ever lead to peace, which requires unity?
How can the communists *un-create* the enemies they made in the name of war?
And how will they ever rule justly when they can never see what they have become, when it is politically impossible to acknowledging that you are like your enemy?

The Captain and Man, blood brothers from elementary school, together are left with the shambles of their political ambitions and dearest ideals. Man inhabits the shambles first, and the reeducation he demands of his friend and prisoner is not that he admit the primacy of independence and freedom but that he understand "how a revolution fought for independence and freedom could make those things worth less than nothing." Independence and freedom are the shambles, the rubble of war. Only raw and unchecked power stands.

But there is some hope in the idea of nothing: the Captain reflects that there was nothing in his mother's womb before he was born. And then there was something, and that something began to be loved. "Nothing" can be a sign of possibility and potential. But to see it as such requires first admitting that what we have, what we fought for even, is less valuable than what still could be.

... I understood, at last, how our revolution had gone from being the vanguard of political change to the rearguard hoarding power. In this transformation, we were not unusual. Hadn't the French and the Americans done exactly the same? Once revolutionaries themselves, they had become imperialists, colonizing and occupying our defiant little land, taking away our freedom in the name of saving us.

—The narrator of *The Sympathizer*



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