

The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen

Thursday, August 15, 2019

Skokie Public Library

2:00 p.m.

10 participants

Notetaker: Elizabeth Hopkins

Discussion was led by Allyson Coan

Allyson asked everyone to give their 1-5 rating of the book at the beginning of the discussion. She mentioned we would give a rating again at the end to see if anyone left with a different impression. The results were:

4
3
2
2
2.5
4
3
4
1
5

Does anyone have a strong feeling that they want to share? To start?

- The reveal of him just standing by when the woman was raped...I was out. I was done with him.
- Really difficult to read.

What did that add to the story? Necessary? Gave you a different perspective?

- I only know what I know about the Vietnam War from what I read in history books. I do feel like this book highlights the brutality of this war on a more personal level. Gave me a better understanding.
- A lot of people in my book group had to put the book down and take a break from it. The author said he was really trying to expose how many films about war actually romanticize violence. He had to force himself as a writer to really look at that passage. He wanted to make it as graphic as possible so people couldn't look away.

[Georgetown Voice article](#)...reads quote about females being brutalized and violated. Did anyone have a problem that we never heard from the woman herself?

- The author has said the main character is a misogynist. That's not the narrator's mind set. It's realistic to the character.

- That point was my light bulb moment. When this moment hit you realize he's not moral. The author did a good job at making you look at the moral code for both sides. That's something I hadn't experienced before when reading about Vietnam.

The title...The Sympathizer?

- Out of all the things that he blocked out...the rape was what he chose to focus on and block out completely. Interesting that that was most traumatic for him.
- I'm kind of sick of books or movies making stories of trauma to women in men's stories. Tell those stories but frame them differently.
- Fridging in comic books. The reason the man becomes who he is to avenge her. Why is that a trope?
- The women were very demoralized. Not all mentioned by name. Is this an accurate representation of Vietnamese culture? Being referred to as "the wife"? I don't know.

Does anyone want to talk about what they liked the best?

- Did anyone else find it funny when he compared America to life in Vietnam? A few times when I laughed. Black humour.
- I liked this new perspective of the Vietnam War. Getting his perspective of looking at America is something I really enjoyed.
- I like that a book of Fiction sent me on this whole learning curve. I knew so little about the Vietnam War. I also watched Apocalypse Now and a few documentaries. I really respect that it forced me to open my eyes a bit.
- Books are windows or mirrors. This was a big window for most of us. A life experience that we haven't had.

What did you like least?

- Some of the writing at the beginning is just so long. It was overwhelming.

How did you find the format?

- I hated that there weren't any quotation marks!
- Audio? Had to buy on audible. The narrator didn't use different voices so I couldn't tell who was talking.
- The story meandered a lot. I get that it's a written confession. So much harder to not have quotation marks.

This style...a 295 page confession...did it work for anyone?

- I kept wondering if maybe I was just in the mood for summer reads so this just wasn't working for my head space. Maybe better to read in the winter?
- A much better winter book!
- I don't know if he could have told this story in a different format. You know that you're getting a story that's being coerced out of him, any other telling or format wouldn't have worked. The style was frustrating but it needed to be that way.
- I like that the voice was expansive. East vs West, Hollywood film making, etc. A more traditional plot would have defeated his purpose.

- It's important not to make stories like this salacious. I didn't enjoy the style but it helped the author tell this story more responsibly.
- Is this a well done book and not my cup of tea? Yelp review for an Indian restaurant. "I never had Indian before and it was terrible." You can apply this to books. Appreciating it but not liking it.
- Once it got out of the confession format it was harder for me to finish.
- Atonement? Acts of violence...the telling of his tale was his way of coming to terms with what happened. He was definitely a multi-faceted character. Force myself to read two chapters a day.

I should have kept track of how many times we say "sympathize." Let's discuss the relevance of the title.

- Dual meanings to things. Saying something is nothing is actually something. He's a communist sympathizer? Or does he sympathize with both sides? He does a lot of dual meanings.
- Read somewhere...his big fault was that he didn't identify with one or the other. He stayed in this weird middle. Was that a fault? Was that bad?
- Probably would have made his life easier if he truly cared about one side. He had a personal connection to each side which made it hard for him to disengage.
- Horrors of war sometimes come from the everyday people who happen to be standing back and going along with it.
- You can apply the idea of being neutral to today's political climate. Not identifying with a certain party.
- If he had chosen a side more fully...look what happened to his friend. You can see how disillusioned he is.

Is there any topic someone really wants to discuss?

- The movie making aspect of it? It was funny. The tropes and expectations of Hollywood.
- The part that moved me the most was in that section. When he makes a grave for his mother. The women were one dimensional but this was so much from the narrator's perspective. I got what anguish it would be to be in a culture that's decimated by war. To not be able to grieve your loved ones. An incredible scene.
- That scene is when I thought above everything else- he's human. I could sympathize with how hard life had been for him.
- Writing this satire...also not just about the Vietnamese struggle but also current day plights. Refugees and where we are politically with that. Well executed satire. A really good book to study.

What did you think about the book's length?

- If it had quotation marks I wouldn't have balked at the length. It was just so dense. I love a good character driven tale. I would have loved more development with his two friends.

Anyone that you wish knew more or a topic?

- I would have enjoyed it more if I got into anyone's world more.

- Really hard book to start. You dive right in and you don't know what's going on. You don't know who these characters are or what's going on. It took a long time to get through the first few chapters. That was frustrating.
- I prefer periods! I also prefer a little bit more action too. The scene where they're fleeing, the wife and son, I thought "This book is so good!" and then the next day it felt like a complete slog.
- When I think "spy novel" this title doesn't come to mind. I think something more fast-paced. The first sentence is a great hook, but the first page is one long run-on sentence.

Did that first sentence lie to you about what this book was going to be?

- "Man of two minds" Is he? Dad's French Mom's Vietnamese? Reference to his two friends?
- He carries in his physical self what colonialism can do.

Why more upset to his reaction to being called a bastard rather than the actual word itself?

- He likes to think of himself as in control of himself and his emotions. I think he was just upset that he lost control of his own emotions.
- Was he repressing how he felt or was he not admitting it to his captors?

Any other topics that you want to mention before we do our ratings again?

- I liked getting this view of the immigrant refugee experience. Seeing the wealth of the soldiers and then seeing it all taken away from them. *Front Desk* middle grade novel about immigrants. I just finished that which was all about the Chinese immigration experience. The main character's parents were doctors and then they were managing a motel.
- It's a book about refugees rather than immigrants...

Would you want to discuss this with your book groups?

- A patron who is in an all male book club came in...it got me thinking. If I were to create an advisory list of titles for him, would this make my list?
- I did do it with my group. There was a man in the group who did not like it at all. Felt like it needed a good editor. A few women whose husbands had been in Vietnam. They loved the book but would not recommend it to their husbands. But don't do it in the summertime.
- My group is all retired women. They are looking for cozy/gentle fun reads.
- I think my group would hate the book but it would definitely lead to different discussions. The denseness of it would be too much for them.
- We take August off. This would be a good September book so they had two months to read it.

3.5-4

stick with 3

3

3 it will be easier to finish reading now.

Stick with 3

stay at 4

stay at 5 Changed my vision of Vietnam War.

stay at 1

appreciate the book but not my cup of tea 3.5

I'd go from 3 to 4