



# Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War

*Viet Thanh Nguyen*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

# Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War

*Viet Thanh Nguyen*

**Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War** Viet Thanh Nguyen  
FINALIST, NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FOR NONFICTION, 2016

All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory. From the author of the Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Sympathizer* comes a searching exploration of the conflict Americans call the Vietnam War and Vietnamese call the American War a conflict that lives on in the collective memory of both nations.

From a kaleidoscope of cultural forms novels, memoirs, cemeteries, monuments, films, photography, museum exhibits, video games, souvenirs, and more *Nothing Ever Dies* brings a comprehensive vision of the war into sharp focus. At stake are ethical questions about how the war should be remembered by participants that include not only Americans and Vietnamese but also Laotians, Cambodians, South Koreans, and Southeast Asian Americans. Too often, memorials valorize the experience of one's own people above all else, honoring their sacrifices while demonizing the enemy or, most often, ignoring combatants and civilians on the other side altogether. Visiting sites across the United States, Southeast Asia, and Korea, Viet Thanh Nguyen provides penetrating interpretations of the way memories of the war help to enable future wars or struggle to prevent them.

Drawing from this war, Nguyen offers a lesson for all wars by calling on us to recognize not only our shared humanity but our ever-present inhumanity. This is the only path to reconciliation with our foes, and with ourselves. Without reconciliation, war's truth will be impossible to remember, and war's trauma impossible to forget.

"

## Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War Details

Date : Published April 11th 2016 by Harvard University Press

ISBN : 9780674660342

Author : Viet Thanh Nguyen

Format : Hardcover 384 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, War, Cultural, Asia

 [Download Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War Viet Thanh Nguyen**

---

## From Reader Review Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War for online ebook

### Guy Austin says

Nothing Ever Dies is an academic essay about the Vietnam War or as the Vietnamese call it the American War. The memory you hold depends on, where you were physically and mentally during the war, from whom you receive the information from and who's version of memory you have received.

This was a hard read. It requires a good deal of focus to digest the thoughts written with great density. The author obviously spent a great deal of time researching and pulling the complicated thoughts together.

The book is broken into three parts. Ethics, Industries and Aesthetics.

There is overwhelming detail and in some of those details, I lost the point never really understanding the intentions the writing is meant to convey. However, there is also some great takeaways in the writing.

Two ideas I pulled early on are:

"Man, individual or collective, is just as interested in forgetting what he has done as he is in remembering what was done to him. Man is ever and always implicated in power, and no one is innocent except the infant and the most abject victim."

"Power must be used, and the only question is whether it will be used ethically."

With these I held hope, but as the telling continued I felt it was all a bit too many words to say the same thing over and again.

Parts of this book, I loved. Others I found tiresome. I am torn between 2-3 stars. I wanted to love it. I know many do love it. Perhaps, it is just not for me.

---

### Coenraad says

Viet Thanh Nguyen delivers an encompassing work, moving between the deeply philosophical and the deeply personal. He investigates how wars in general, and particularly the war we usually call the Vietnam War, are remembered, memorialised and forgotten. What is ethical, acceptable, honest and proper? He looks at monuments, literature, movies and the pronouncements of a variety of philosophers and mines his topic thoroughly, convincingly and movingly.

Nguyen se uitgebreide ondersoek na die onthou, die herdenking en die vergeet van oorloë, spesifiek die een wat ons die Viëtnam-oorlog noem, voer mee, omdat hy nie alleen na verskeie filosowe se idees verwys nie, maar ook na sy eie ervaring en sy familiegeskiedenis. Lank en kompleks, maar beslis oortuigend en pakkend.

---

### Martin says

I first watched *Full Metal Jacket* when I was in high school. I must have been 15 or 16 years old. Most of my friends had already seen it, and they would quote lines from the opening scene all the time. Sergeant Hartman, the senior drill instructor, eviscerates a group of Marine recruits on their first day at boot camp. He curses them in extraordinary turns of phrase, insults their racial backgrounds and physical appearances.

The way my high school buddies related this scene led me to believe the movie was comedic. It was funny stuff for teenagers, the kind of insults we'd lob at each other.

I always wanted to watch war movies, and in the mid-1980s a string of movies about the Vietnam war were released. Having seen the ridiculous *Rambo*-genre films, where war seems cool, heroic, and easy -- where one man can wipe out the bad guys with a single clip of ammunition -- my father made me watch *Platoon* to straighten me out. In my teenage ignorance, I loved Reagan, hated Commies, and believed that the U.S. could never be wrong, so we must have really won in Vietnam but somehow came out of it a "loser."

*Platoon* was the first "real" war film I watched, and even though I was just a teenager I was aware of the film's impact outside my small world in suburban New Jersey. The scenes of soldiers dying, killed the moment they stuck their heads up, shattered my imagination about combat: war ain't fun, and *Rambo* was bullshit.

But these new films were also supposed to help us reckon with our past, and they were my first "education" about Vietnam.

*Full Metal Jacket*: I remember the night I put the VHS tape in our VCR after the rest of the family was asleep, ready for the hilarious scene my friends had been quoting. Instead of laughing, I was dumbstruck. I had never heard such language delivered in so sustained a manner before. I couldn't believe that Marine boot camp might actually have been this way. I didn't know what to think -- was the drill sergeant's routine merely an act for our entertainment?

Then the second half of the movie left me exhilarated. Here was a film that was supposed to convey the insanity and immorality of war - and it did - yet it left me salivating for more war. Sure, the war may have been a mistake, but look at these heroes. Animal Mother, played by Adam Baldwin, may have been a psychopath, but he was right about those little enemy bastards.

And then there was the last scene. Watch: Shoot Me

The Marine squad, filled with rage and lusting for revenge, locates the sniper who has killed several of its members. The sniper is a 12-year-old girl. The Marines riddle her with bullets, and then stand over her dying body debating what to do: put her out of her misery or leave her to rot in a pool of her own blood, a kind of moral purgatory.

I did not understand it at the time, but the role of the sniper symbolized the American folly of that war, a war in which our enemy was willing to sacrifice its youth to repel the invaders.

The sniper knew she would die. First, she was supposed to decimate the squad of Marines trying to make its way through a leveled city, but this 12-year-old girl had to know her life would end in the rubble of Hue. And when the Marines finally get to her, their ambiguous reaction -- their unsatisfying result -- leaves the viewer feeling the same way. All this, for a girl? How unheroic.

But even a film as controversial as *Full Metal Jacket* can only go so far in undermining our love affair with war and violence. And as the Vietnamese-American scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen explains in *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, this kind of war story only appears to tell the whole truth.

Scenes of soldiers and shooting and dying "pump us up, get the blood going, that tell the 'truth' about war through spectacular battles and sacrificial soldiers, also affirm the necessity of war. This limited way of thinking about war stories is one of the reasons why antiwar movies are often not actually against war. They continually place at their center the soldier, and her or his validation, as hero or as antihero, persuades even some reluctant viewers to be resigned to war," Nguyen writes.

"They submit to the passive-aggressive demand to 'support our troops' if they oppose the war, for what ingrate would not affirm these patriots?" Nguyen adds.

Among his most potent analyses of memory and war is Nguyen's dismantling of the 'Support the Troops' mantra.

Nguyen: "The slogan's refusal to judge the soldiers also implies a refusal to judge the civilians. What lies behind the slogan is not only support for the troops but the absolution of the same civilians who utter the phrase. If the hands of the troops are clean, so are the hands of these civilians. As for the American dead, they have not died for nothing after all. This slogan has arisen in their memory, proving once again that the memories the living create of the dead -- and the dead themselves -- are strategic resources in the campaigns of future wars. Once the dead seemed to cry out against war, but now, just as plausibly, the dead seem to cry out in support of our troops who wage new wars. At least this is what the living say, and it is what the living say that really counts... The story of supporting the troops affirms an American identity invested in the justice of American wars and the innocence of American intentions. This identity is... the selective memory of a country that imagines itself as a perpetual innocent."

This is a book about memory, but not just the images and recollections that bounce around in each of our minds. It is also about the uses of language and the industry of memory: the publishing industry, Hollywood, museum- and memorial-builders, and the powerful institutions that disseminate the memories they produce across the world. In the case of the U.S., its industry of memory is more powerful than any other nation's, including Vietnam. Thus, Vietnamese memories of the conflict and Vietnamese interpretations of its meaning are largely lost on American audiences who read U.S. authors and watch Hollywood films, or visit U.S. war memorials where the other is absent.

Nguyen wants us to level things by obtaining "a just memory" -- a memory that recognizes our own inhumanity as well as the humanity and inhumanity of the other, the other's ability to inflict cruelty on their own, as Vietnamese did to fellow Vietnamese after the fall of Saigon. He asks whether a "pure forgiveness" is possible, forgiving without requiring anything in return so as to finally extinguish old resentments and vendettas.

And he believes it is absolutely necessary that we reverse our attitude about the "necessity" of war. We live in an age of Forever War, where battlefield victories are no longer needed to keep the U.S. war machine in business. This makes us believe that perpetual war is the norm and is sustainable, and that efforts for peace are noble but misguided, and fruitless anyway. In fact, perpetual war is neither necessary nor sustainable, and our only hope in fashioning a "just memory" relies on understanding that peace must be the default position, not war.

We must also recognize our own complicity in supporting the industry of memory that perpetuates war. We not only elect the politicians and support war-making industries, we buy the books, watch the movies, and obtain the products that make our own lives more comfortable -- the products of companies that also manufacture the tools of the war machine that kill others in faraway places. Recognizing one's own complicity should not be paralyzing, but cause for action.

Nguyen's insights and questions are important, but also depressing. Yet he seems to be a guarded optimist: while nothing may ever die, history also does not operate along a straight line of inevitability.

## Thomas says

A brilliant book about war and its never-ending consequences. Viet Thanh Nguyen dissects how society glamorizes veterans while dehumanizing victims, how certain industries profit from war and its bloodshed, and how we often only interpret wars from our own side (hence, why Americans call it the Vietnam War whereas the Vietnamese call it the American War). Nguyen gathers evidence from museums, monuments, novels, films, etc. to illustrate the devastating effects of war and how we often overlook the most awful parts of mass combat. While he focuses on the war between America and Vietnam and others, his ideas span all wars, and he provides a powerful argument about creating just memory instead of forgetting our past and allowing it to repeat itself.

As a second generation Vietnamese American born and raised in the United States, I received a whitewashed, America-centered education all throughout my pre-university years. I feel thankful that Nguyen wrote this book, as it has helped me once again see beyond the narrative we feed children in the United States. *Nothing Ever Dies* reveals harsh truths: that war kills people and erases living people's pasts, that we laud soldiers' bravery while ignoring their rape, that pro-war propaganda perpetuates hate with the intent of eliminating human compassion. Though quite academic and sometimes long in its descriptions, I would still recommend *Nothing Ever Dies* to anyone who enjoys history, or wants to learn a way of analyzing history and war outside of the predominant, complacent perspective.

---

## Nick Klagge says

This book turned out to be a lot different than I was expecting. I had read Nguyen's short story collection *The Refugees* about a year ago and liked his writing. I was expecting this book, based on the title, to be a set of personal reflections. It is that to some extent, but it is written in a far more "traditionally academic" style than I had anticipated.

Over the course of the book, Nguyen develops related concepts of "just remembering" and "just forgetting," considering how we as individuals and a society can try to relate to traumatic historical events in a way that does justice to those involved. A key aspect of this process is the recognition of both the humanity and inhumanity within ourselves and within others. Nguyen draws out a progression, wherein we first recognize the humanity within ourselves, then recognize the humanity within others and the inhumanity within ourselves, and finally also recognize the inhumanity in others (moving beyond patronizing them as eternal perfect victims). This was an interesting framework and one that I've continued to think about. Having recently watched the Ken Burns documentary on the Vietnam War, I definitely had some personal sense of this--in the early parts of the movie it was easy to idealize the North Vietnamese communists, but as events unfolded this became less and less tenable, and in the end we are really left with "no heroes." I also appreciated Nguyen's discussion of capitalist power over memory and forgetting, and the idea of "memory industries."

All that said, the writing style did get in my way as a reader. Nguyen is constantly referring to so-and-so's concept of X; while I realize that he is just trying to give proper credit, it's not very meaningful to me as a reader not already familiar with most of the other writers he mentions. (Perhaps I'm not really the target audience.) Pushing more of that stuff to the endnotes would have helped me. I also felt that he often quoted "catchy phrases" from other authors that didn't really add anything to the discussion for me. My favorite parts of the book were his discussions of his personal experiences visiting war-related sites in Vietnam and

Cambodia. He has a strong authorial voice, as you would expect from a talented fiction writer, and I wish he would have used it more rather than (often) obscuring it behind a dry academic style.

---

## Lark Benobi says

This was a sluggish read for me. The language kept settling into bland assertions about the war and its aftermath, assertions that I found to be both self-evident, and overly verbose. The tone altered from intimate writing to academic writing, with little warning. Also I think you get away with writing sentences that begin with words like: "The Vietnamese in America understood that..." only if you're writing a sociological study, and only if you have actually interviewed enough individuals in the group known as "Vietnamese in America" that you can say for sure what it is that they understand, rather than just speculating and homogenizing their understandings. There are so many generalized notions in the book that it felt shallow.

Here is the rest of the passage that begins with: "The Vietnamese in America..":

*"The Vietnamese in America understood that strength and profit came in the concentration of their numbers. Thus, like other new arrivals, they gathered themselves defensively into ethnic enclave, subaltern suburb, and strategic hamlet, those emergent landscapes of the American dream, distinct from the sidelined ghetto, barrio, and reservation of the American nightmare."*

These sentences are a representative example of Nguyen's writing throughout, and frankly I have a lot of trouble with this kind of writing. Not just that "the Vietnamese in America" homogenizes this group, but also, just how much of this sentence makes actual sense, anyway? Just what difference is there between an ethnic enclave and a sidelined ghetto to make one "American Dream" and the other "American Nightmare"? Maybe Nguyen is asserting that Vietnamese immigrants chose to live in segregated neighborhoods, and other ethnic groups are victims of segregation forced upon them? Or? And although "ghetto" and "barrio" and "reservation" are ethnically coded in contemporary American English, and do call to mind a specific kind of community, just what defines "ethnic enclave," "subaltern suburb," "strategic hamlet," and "emergent landscape?" Are those real categories of community, or just something Nguyen made up to balance the sentence? What the heck makes some of these community types a definitive part of the "American Dream" and the others "American Nightmare?"

If Nguyen had been in my English class I would have handed this book back for a rewrite, marked "fuzzy thinking."

---

## Kathleen says

National Book Award Longlist for Nonfiction 2016. Vietnamese-American author Nguyen makes a convincing case that the memory of war belongs to the victors; or if no victor exists, to the nation that best defines the conflict through print, photographs, and big-screen films. Americans lost roughly 58,000 lives during the Viet Nam War. However, Viet Nam, Laos, and Cambodia lost nearly 4 million. The United States has the Viet Nam Memorial, numerous books, and films like Apocalypse Now that pay tribute to the American soldier. Southeast Asia has little to counterbalance this; and yet, the impact of the war on their populations was so much greater.

I was unaware that the United States paid South Korean soldiers to fight in the War. Apparently, South Korea was so devastated after the Korean War that they welcomed the opportunity to receive American dollars in return for their support in the war effort. Nor was I aware that the South Koreans that remained in

their country rather than traveling to the United States as refugees fared much, much better than those who came to the 'land of opportunity' to begin new lives.

Nguyen's essays are largely of a philosophical nature, but they do make one reflect on the human/inhuman aspects of war. Recommend.

---

### **Evan Leach says**

A thoughtful, erudite examination of the Vietnam War specifically and international relations in general. Nguyen presents a lot of thought provoking ideas and supports his arguments with well-reasoned logic and thorough research. Nguyen is both a first-rate academic mind and an excellent writer of prose, and both skills are fully on display here.

I listened to it on audiobook, which was definitely a mistake for me. I expected this to be a softer, simpler book about the U.S. and Vietnam 50 years after the Vietnam War. I was wrong; this is a pretty academic, dense, and heavy text. I tend to do my audiobooking while driving/doing chores/tending to some other task that commands some of my attention; this book demands close reading and full attention. I definitely would have gotten more out of this if I had read the physical book instead of listened to it. Still, what I did get was thought provoking and interesting. **4.0 stars** (and could be higher upon a subsequent, closer reading), recommended!

---

### **Bob says**

This non-fiction book by the author of *The Sympathizer* is a challenging philosophical analysis of war - particularly but not exclusively, the American War in Vietnam and its contemporaneous killings in Laos and Cambodia - and of the artificial and real juxtapositions that war requires and creates, such as humanity/inhumanity, warriors and civilians, actors and victims, memory and reality, "us" and "others", etc. Filled with profound ethical and historical concepts (I had to read many passages twice to understand them) and with the insights of many other writers and filmmakers (e.g., W.G. Sebald: "there is no difference between passive resistance and passive collaboration - it's the same thing"; or, Jacques Derrida: "Pure forgiveness arises from the paradox of forgiving the unforgivable. All other forms of forgiveness are conditional - I will forgive, if you give me something"). In its essence, the book seeks to have us recognize the endless war in which America has engaged since the end of WWII (and, arguably, going back to the end of the 19th Century), how it is affected by our memories of war (note that if the 150 foot long Vietnam memorial in Washington had the names of Vietnamese killed on it, the wall would be 3 miles long), and how we need to reflect upon the realities of war and its lingering social and moral consequences in order to create pathways to reconciliation with "the others" and an end to endless war.

---

### **Elise (TheBookishActress) says**

...hey no offense but why is *Just Memory* the best piece of nonfiction writing to have ever been written.

In *Just Memory*, the question surrounds the politics of memory. In the media, the identity of war dictates its representation in different media: Vietnam, the bad war, is a tragedy for America, but only for America. Likewise in Vietnam, the Term 'American War' invites Vietnamese to think of themselves "as victims of

foreign aggression,” rather than an oftentime perpetrator and invador of Cambodia and Laos. He explains “My desire to remember as many as I can is a reaction to the lack of inclusiveness found in many, and perhaps most, memories of the war, or at least the ones circulating before the public.” As a reaction, Nguyen wishes to work towards a more inclusive memory of war; this is a part of the struggle for a collective memory, where our competing views can be brought towards the ‘reassuring style of American pluralism.’ He wishes to remember the forgotten of war, the marginalized, the minor, the women, the environment. And just as essential to this is art: art endures, and art requests that we remember. As Nguyen says, “after the official memos and speeches are forgotten, the history books ignored, and the powerful are dust, art remains.” And thus, corrupt art can destroy. We create resignation to the horrors of the world via our art, resignation to the fact that our side is, indeed, right. Instead of a thing we come to terms with via art, memory becomes an industry “ready to capitalize on history by selling memory to consumers hooked on nostalgia.” Just memory and just representation is only possible when the demonized and marginalized can “seize industries of memory.” And without representation, without a just memory of a war, how can we find our identities? Nguyen sums it up perfectly: “our ambivalence about war’s identity simply expresses ambivalence about our own identities.” The ethics of memory are such that without just memory, without a just view on war and a just representation of war, our own identities — especially the identities of the marginalized — will be forfeit. And it is this dynamic of identity that Nguyen criticizes throughout *The Sympathizer*.

---

### **Anita says**

Viet Thanh Nguyen is just as brilliant in his work about the ethics of memory and war as he was in debut novel "The Sympathizer." I read this in two days - so impressed by his rigor, erudition and fairness.

---

### **Dick says**

This is a good read. It's an academic essay on a difficult subject. I highlighted more in this book than I have in any other book. Very thought provoking. I was not surprised by atrocities and cruelties committed by Americans. I was surprised by the interpretations of war and it's aftermath by Viet Thanh Nguyen. Kudos to Nguyen for an excellent piece of work.

I agree with 99% of all in the book except sometimes I disagree with the degree to which his assertions or descriptions are true. For example: his assertion that America is driven by the greed of capitalism and this causes America to be the aggressor in many wars. There's truth in that. There's also truth in that America's values (e.g. democracy, individual freedom, and yes capitalism) felt threatened.

Although Nguyen is reasonable balanced in criticizing both sides, I felt he did not use the various communist atrocities in China, the Soviet Union, Chile, and elsewhere as examples. He focused on capitalism.

I also disagree with his assessment of minorities (others) getting there art published. I think the American publishing world craves and encourages authors of all types, even those with unflattering views of the establishment. It's hard to get published and get good grades, even if you are an American white male.

I also sense that his assertion that American media and the American military comprise a war machine -- working together -- is a little off. My sense is that the media is often against the military. That's why the CIA tended to try to squelch authors like Hemingway. Nguyen's points, however, are worthy of contemplation.

Nguyen also doesn't address whether there ever is a reason to go to war. Can there be a good reason? Was it just to fight Hitler?

This book left me thinking (in a good way). A good example is in the final pages the books says "Even American tendencies against intellectuals, the elites, and the French ..." Hmmm. I've never felt America was against intellectuals. It has only been against intellectuals on some issues. And the French, well we love and we hate 'em.

The book has also lead me to more good writings about the Vietnam war.

One more point: this book is a slow read because Nguyen is writing about a tough subject and he uses some subtle descriptions (memory and unremembering, own versus other, flat versus round characters).

Note: Nguyen seems to be anti-capitalistic. He seems to believe communistic or socialistic systems are less prone to aggression. He feels the profit motive is a driver in war. I believe the motives for war are complex and although profit (or the preservation of them) has been a factor in some wars, it's not the only and not the major factor in most wars. He makes statements like "...onward march of global capitalism, military-industrial complexes, the dominance of self-interested political parties, the survival of nation-states, and the perpetuation of power for the sake of power." Perhaps I should substitute the word capitalism with trade???

This book will cause to to reflect on history and wonder whether Nguyen's statements are true or false to to what degree they are true or false. The problem with history is that (1) its complex and (2) every statement that seems to hold most of the time has a counter-example.

---

### **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

I think the main points in this long academic treatment of topics surrounding war and memory are summed up in this Fresh Air interview.

The author spent eleven years on the research for this book, and along the way also wrote the Pulitzer Prize winning novel The Sympathizer. I gave the novel five stars but despite the longlisting of this book for the National Book Award for Non-Fiction, I won't be able to rate this one as highly.

It is clear that Nguyen is interested in war and memory. I was led to some very thoughtful moments, considering who has the power to control memory, and provided a comprehensive list of works of fiction and memoir written by Vietnamese people for Vietnamese audiences. But I found the exploration of film to be exhaustive/ing and duplicating much of what is between the lines of his novel. I suspected that this was his primary research interest, and found multiple scholarly articles dating back at least a decade on branches of this topic (his 1997 dissertation seems to be on a related topic - Asian American representation, and that topic resurfaces in Nothing Ever Dies as well.) For me, it was recycled too much within the confines of this book, and I grew weary of it.

I would have liked the entire novel to be an expansion of the last three chapters:

On True War Stories

On Powerful Memory

Just Forgetting

---

## Dan says

I finished Viet Nguyen's latest a few weeks back, but I haven't posted anything yet because I've been mulling over its message. He doesn't pull punches in his critique of American adventuring overseas, nor does he fall back on a too-convenient portrayal of Vietnamese as victims. If nothing else, Nguyen's book is a clarion call for a full and honest assessment of inhumanity, in all its forms. This does not, however, mean that both sides are equal in this particular conflict. As Nguyen is quick to point out, approximately 58,000 Americans died in Vietnam; Over 3,000,000 Vietnamese suffered the same fate. He also notes that while we have an exact number of American casualties, the same can not be said of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian soldiers and civilians.

I was thinking about this book over the recent Memorial Day weekend. Nguyen writes about ethics and how when it comes to war, a cultural's central response tends to be celebrating its own humanity while ignoring the enemy's inhumanity. Another way of looking at that would be that each side likes to ignore its own inhumanity. For Nguyen that tendency is on display with the aphorism *oppose war, support soliders*:

Perhaps one could support the troops if one only opposed the war on issues of foreign policy, or if one simply did not agree with the expenditure of American treasure on military adventurism. But if one opposed a war because it killed innocent people, then how could one support the troops who inflicted the damage?

At its core, this book is an examination of responsibility, an insistence that we acknowledge our culpability, not just as Americans or Vietnamese, but as subjects of a global system inseparable from the mechanism that create and justify war. "The question of responsibility [may be] particularly pressing for an all-volunteer army versus an army with many draftees, as was the case in Vietnam," but the citizenry at large is not immune. We, too, bear some responsibility for "support[ing] through [our] votes, [our] attitudes, and [our] actions" the killing.

The war created a refugee crisis (of which Nguyen is part) not dissimilar to what we're seeing today with Syrians. I only bring Syria up to illustrate Nguyen's point that the refugee identity is itself a kind of violence, one that robs the individual of their full identity while also defanging the refugee by recasting their experience for the American public as simply another flavor of immigration. The Vietnamese refugee, like any "ethnic or racial" other, must confront the "identity politics" pejorative. But this is a trap, for "[t]o do so is to be forced into accepting the impossible choice that a dominant society built on whiteness gives to its minorities: be a victim or have a voice, accept one's lesser identity or strive to have no identity." This part of the book spoke to me the most. The idea that "hav[ing] no identity at all is the privilege of whiteness" is not a new idea, but it's one that is gaining ground in larger cultural conversations. Again, this is an insistence on accepting our full humanity/inhumanity. Erasure of the other's fullness is not accidental, nor is occluding the equally idiosyncratic nature of the dominate culture. Both are mechanisms of ignoring one's inhumanity, which, in turn, creates a path to further violence. "Southeast Asians," Nguyen writes, "must insist that the war that defines them in America is not only their war, but a war made by white people, a war that is not an aberration but a manifestation of a war machine that would prefer refugees to think of their stories as immigrant stories."

Nguyen is a brilliant writer and a much needed one. He is also, as all writers are, as all people are, idiosyncratic. He insists on his own fullness. I haven't mentioned his novel yet, but that, too, is excellent and in many ways a companion to this more academic work. He is a novelist and a scholar. In that sense also, Nguyen defies categorization. I recommend this book to anybody interested in learning more about the complexities of the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese-American experience. If you're just looking for a war history, though, you won't find that here.

**If you liked this, make sure to follow me on Goodreads for more reviews!**

---

### **Kim says**

So many important lessons in this book, about how to consider our perceived enemies, how to re-consider ourselves and our capacity for good and bad, how our identities can be actively shaped, how to really forgive and how to make peace present instead of just make war absent.

---