

# 13 QUESTIONS WITH Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai

**hoopla digital:** *The Mountains Sing* is a work of fiction that covers a wide swath of Vietnamese history, some events more familiar to Western readers and some perhaps less so. How do you think reading fictionalized accounts of history like this differs from reading nonfiction? What kind of learning happens in each?

**Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai:**

I believe a historical novel can go beyond what a nonfiction book can do, by reconstructing a world with which the reader can take part and emotionally connect. If well-researched, a historical novel can offer almost the same level of insight and understanding compared to a nonfiction account. I decided to employ fiction for *The Mountains Sing* as I believe fiction can help us get at a deeper, experiential and personalized truth about historical events and their aftermath. As Tim O'Brien said: "By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened...and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify what happened."<sup>1</sup>

For example, in *The Mountains Sing*, I started with the truth that my grandmother perished in the Great Hunger of 1945, but I did not know all the details. So I fictionalized those details to be able to clarify my emotions, my anger, my sadness, and in the end, my forgiveness for the people who caused her death. Ultimately, forgiveness is the greatest gift we can give ourselves, as in the words of Grandma Diêu Lan: "If you bear grudges, you're the one who'll have to bear the burden of sorrow."

**hd:** We understand that you interviewed hundreds of people in your years-long research for this book. Can you tell us about that process and how you crafted a story around it?

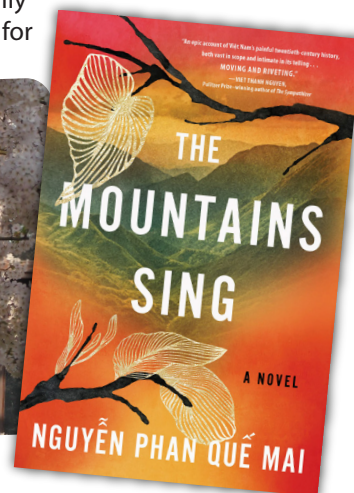
**NPQM:** I researched for this novel my whole life, first by listening to the elderly Vietnamese people. A lot of Vietnamese history is untold (due to censorship reasons) and I wanted to document it. I spent a lot of time at my parents' villages, talking to people about their personal experiences. I interviewed countless people who fought on different sides of the war. I grounded my research through reading fiction and nonfiction books, watching movies and documentaries, as well as visiting museums, libraries, special document archives....

Before becoming a full-time writer, I worked as a communications adviser for international and UN agencies. I conducted many types of research and wrote reports on subjects ranging from child labor to human trafficking. This type of writing required scientific approaches to data collection, documentation, and analysis; however, for a fiction project such as *The Mountains Sing*, I paid more attention to capturing the emotional depth of the human stories. I documented such depth in my novel not with just my pen, but with every cell of my being.

I used to be a documentary filmmaker, and a film director once told me: "You can't make a good film unless your hands tremble behind the camera." Similarly, I could not have written *The Mountains Sing* if I wasn't moved by the story that I decided to tell.

A few days ago, I listened to the audiobook of *The Mountains Sing*, narrated beautifully by Quyen Ngo. As the book finished, I sat there and cried so hard, for so long. I cried for my grandmothers whom I never had the chance to meet. I miss them more than ever. And I cry every time I re-read the diary entries of Hương's mother. Those entries represent the sorrow of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese women whose husbands never returned from the war.

<sup>1</sup>Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2009), p. 152



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**hd:** Did the Trần family grow with the stories you heard and wanted to weave into this book, or did you always expect there would be many brothers and sisters?

**NPQM:** Vietnamese people have gone through so much that each family's account could be written into an epic novel. For many years, I wanted to write a book that encompasses the experiences of not just my family, but of others as well. I wanted to create a world which is authentically Vietnamese and fill it with Vietnamese characters, language, poetry, and culture. Yet I could not find a key to open the door to that world.

Then, in 2012, when I was traveling with a Vietnamese friend in a car, I asked him what it was like for him during the Việt Nam War. He told me that he was 12 years old when Hà Nội was targeted by B-52 bombers. His parents were in Russia at that time and he was living with his grandmother, who saved him from the bombing raids. His story moved me so much. When I went home that evening, after putting my two young children to bed, I sat down at my computer and Googled about the bombings of Hà Nội. I heard audio broadcasts of the sirens warning citizens about bombing raids. With tears running down my face, I penned 2,000 words which eventually become the opening scene of *The Mountains Sing*. I wrote without knowing where the story would lead me.

But I knew I had to let Grandma Diệu Lan have many children, who would be separated by historical events which in turn lead them to becoming the enemy of one another.

**hd:** You developed so many characters throughout the book. Did any of them come naturally from the start? Were any difficult for you to write?

**NPQM:** The character Hương came naturally to me, because I wanted to be her, to be able to listen to her grandmother's story and make sense of her family's experiences. Just like Hương in *The Mountains Sing*, for several of my childhood years, books were my only friends; they allowed me to escape from desperation and poverty. My family had moved from the north to the south of Việt Nam; it was just a few years after the war, and despite the country's unification, the North-South tension ran strong. While living amidst this tension I understood the deep wounds that divided our country and families.

The most challenging part of the book was to represent the trauma of war and the related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While PTSD is well-recognized in the United States, there has been little research done in Việt Nam. Returning soldiers who struggle with PTSD are often seen as "crazy" or "possessed by ghosts." I feel a tremendous responsibility to highlight such trauma in *The Mountains Sing*.

**hd:** Your book is very honest in its exploration of difficult topics and events. How might it enlighten those who received a traditional Western education? What do you hope they walk away with?

**NPQM:** Grandma Diệu Lan told Hương: "You and I have seen enough death and violence to know that there's only one way we can talk about wars: honestly. Only through honesty can we learn about the truth." I searched for the truth through my fiction and I could only do it via honesty.

The writer in me also experienced hesitation. During the crafting process, I often asked myself, "Who would want to read a book about violence, death, war? Shouldn't I make the book lighter, more cheerful?" But I decided that I needed to write about war to highlight the value of peace, about darkness to be able to talk about light, and about desperation to be able to bring a sense of hope.

For those who received a traditional Western education where little information was given about Việt Nam from the Vietnamese perspective, I hope they will walk away with a deeper appreciation of Việt Nam, our people, language, history, culture, poetry, and music. And I hope they will remember a few Vietnamese words, landmarks, and culinary dishes, too.

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**hd:** Much of this book is told from the perspective of a young girl. How did this decision to have a child narrator inform your storytelling approach?

**NPQM:** I think as a human race, we are still very much naive about the devastating impact of wars and armed conflicts on individuals, families, and societies. Hương represents that naivete. Only when she has lived through war and directly experienced it can she comprehend its horror.

The decision to have a child narrator is also critical in my storytelling approach because children are curious and open to learning new things. And they are more forgiving. There is a tendency for people to dehumanize the enemy. Having Hương as a young character, I could show her willingness to immerse herself in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods*, so that she could make friends with the American girl Laura. In return, a reader who has never experienced war can assume the innocent eyes of Hương and learn about the brutality of war and its devastating impact.

**hd:** The generational trauma the Trần family has experienced is intense, and yet many of them remain hopeful. Is there a person or event in your own life, or from interviews, that inspired that outlook? Or do you find that it is present widely in Vietnamese culture?

**NPQM:** My parents are my inspiration. They went through so much but remained very positive, hopeful, and resourceful. I will never forget how my father gathered pieces of wood people had thrown away to build our bookshelf or how my mother cut the legs of her own pants into two and sewed them into cloth boots for my brothers and I to wear as we studied by our oil lamp's light. The rural area of Bạc Liêu where I grew up was infested with mosquitoes and our naked feet would be their yummy targets.

My parents' incredible work ethic, their love for literature, and the importance that they place on education were the basis of Grandma's Diệu Lan's outlook in life. Just like Grandma Diệu Lan, my mother would do anything for her children. When I gave birth to my kids, she flew to my city and stayed for months. During the night, she would take the baby from me and tell me to sleep. I would not be here without my parents, who continue to be my inspiration in everyday life.

**hd:** Although this is your debut novel, it's far from your first published work—especially as a celebrated poet. How do you think your experience writing in other forms influenced this book?

**NPQM:** *The Mountains Sing* wouldn't be what it is now without my experiences as a translator, poet, essayist, and journalist. Because the book deals with dark topics, I wanted to lift it up with lyrical language and poetic images. As a translator, I am very much aware of the need to preserve the Vietnamese essence of my writing. As essayist and journalist, I see the need for thorough research.

I wrote *The Mountains Sing* with the mindset of a Vietnamese who is fully aware of the importance of preserving the Vietnamese authenticity of her novel. My Vietnamese characters think and speak in Vietnamese, yet I had to transfer their thoughts and speech into English. My responsibility as a translator was to capture the Vietnamese essence of such expressions and not Westernize them.

I would like to thank readers of the book who accept the challenge of fully immersing themselves in Vietnamese culture by reading *The Mountains Sing*. It is not just diacritical marks, but you might have noticed that I do not always translate Vietnamese words. For example, early in the book, the reader learns that *nón lá* is a conical hat made of woven bamboo and palm leaves. After this explanation, I went to use *nón lá* without repeated explanation. It's my intention to familiarize the reader with the Vietnamese culture as much as possible, so that hopefully by the end of the novel, they become a part of it.

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**hd:** *The Mountains Sing* was written in English, rather than translated from Vietnamese. Can you tell us anything about making that choice?

**NPQM:** Since I only had the chance to learn English in eighth grade, there has always been a distance between English and me. The distance is helpful as it provides me with the ability to reflect calmly and objectively on the many historical events of my country which caused devastating effects to my family and many Vietnamese I know. Yet this distance is not ideal when it comes to intimate parts of my novel. Parts that I could only write with my heart's beat instead of my mind's reasoning. In those cases, the Vietnamese language would come to my rescue. For example, it was my mother tongue which provided me the entry into the diary of Ngọc (Hương's mother). Previously, I had struggled with penning her diary for many days, until one late night, when I switched to Vietnamese language. I began a fresh version of the diary with the words "*Anh ơi!*" in the intimate way Ngọc would call her missing Vietnamese husband, and my tears flowed together with the diary's entries.

**hd:** Can you tell us about the process of collecting the various proverbs and bits of handed-down wisdom and other symbols that appear throughout the book?

**NPQM:** I grew up inside Việt Nam and only traveled outside the country in 1993, when I was 20 years old. These days, wherever I am, I return home often. I am a tree deeply rooted in Việt Nam. The Vietnamese soil has nursed me with plenty of proverbs and idioms, through daily conversations. As a result, the proverbs, idioms, and images used in *The Mountains Sing* are a part of my Vietnamese vocabulary.

I know many proverbs but selected only those which are unique to Vietnamese culture for *The Mountains Sing*. For example this proverb, "*mưa dầm thấm lâu*—soft and persistent rain penetrates the earth better than a storm," is about the value of patience. It is unique to Việt Nam because my homeland is a tropical country where it rains a lot. The phrase would be natural for Grandma Diệu Lan to use because she is a farmer and works with the earth.

**hd:** If someone who read *The Mountains Sing* was interested in exploring additional Vietnamese authors and books, what might you recommend?

**NPQM:** When it comes to writing by diasporic Vietnamese, Ocean Vuong's poetry and fiction is a must-read. Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and its forthcoming sequel, *The Committed*, are among my favorites, along with Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*, Thanh Hà Lai's *Butterfly Yellow*, Kim Thúy's *Ru*, and Andrew X. Pham's *Catfish and Mandala*. For writing from inside Việt Nam, I highly recommend Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* and Dương Thu Hương's *Paradise of the Blind*. A reader who can read in Vietnamese should check out Trần Thị Trường's *Phố Hoài*, Tạ Duy Anh's *Mối Chứa*, Nguyễn Quang Lập's *Kiến, Chuột và Ruồi*, and Hoàng Minh Tường's *Thời của thánh thần*.\*

**hd:** What do you hope readers take away from your book?

**NPQM:** I hope that while reading *The Mountains Sing*, the reader will join me in embracing the values of peace, normality, and family. In the words of Hương: "I had a wish, I would want nothing fancy, just a normal day when all of us could be together as a family; a day where we could just cook, eat, talk, and laugh. I wondered how many people around the world were having such a normal day and didn't know how special and sacred it was."

**hd:** What can we next look forward to reading from you?

**NPQM:** I am finalizing my PhD thesis which includes a full-length novel, written about Amerasians—children of American soldiers born and abandoned during the Việt Nam War. When I researched for this novel, I was astonished to find out that approximately 100,000 Amerasians were born into the war. More than 45 years after their birth, many of them are still desperately searching for their parents and for their lost identities. They are the forgotten victims of the Việt Nam War and I want to help bring the stories of Amerasians who are in Việt Nam to light.

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I would like to sincerely thank hoopla Book Club for choosing *The Mountains Sing* as their Spring Spotlight Book Club selection. I am a big fan of book clubs and find that discussions with other club members help me delve deeper into my reading experiences. My deepest gratitude to readers who are joining me on the journey to discover Việt Nam. *Cảm ơn quý vị rất nhiều*—thank you very much.