

Viet Thanh Nguyen, 48 years old, is the Aerol Arnold Chair of English and Professor of English and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. Nguyen is married to Lan Duong, a fellow refugee and a professor at the University of California, Riverside. The couple live in the LA neighborhood of Silver Lake and have a 6 year old son, Ellison. Ellison is named after Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*.

In 1975, at the age of 4, Nguyen came to the United States with his two parents and older brother as a refugee from Vietnam. In a June, 2019, interview on the podcast, *American Masters*, Nguyen talks about his family's experience leaving Vietnam. The family's hometown was the first city the North Vietnam Communists captured. Nguyen's father was in Saigon, so his mother took Nguyen and his older brother to Saigon to try to find his father. Because his mother did not think they were leaving for good, his 16 year-old adopted sister was left to watch over the home. His mother, with her two young children, walked on foot to the port city of Nha Trang and caught a boat to Saigon. They did find his father, but a month later they had to flee Saigon when it was overtaken by the Communists. The family first went to Guam and then flew to Pennsylvania. The adopted daughter they left behind was eventually sent to the country for forced "volunteer" work. Nguyen's family continued to financially support this daughter and Nguyen met her again as an adult. He described this daughter as definitely adopted, since she, unlike Nguyen and his brother, knew how to have a good time.

Before Saigon was captured or liberated, depending on one's loyalties, the Americans conducted the largest helicopter evacuation in history. All American civilian and military personnel, totalling around 7,000 people were evacuated in a military maneuver called "Operation Frequent Wind." Tens of thousands of South Vietnamese civilians who were associated with the southern regime were also evacuated. As was described in *The Sympathizer*, Vietnamese citizens who could buy passage through financial or other means also were included. The United States evacuated about 2,000 orphans from the country in a maneuver called "Operation Babylift." For those South Vietnamese left behind, it has been estimated that between 200,000 and 300,000 were forced to go to re-education camps where they were endured torture, starvation, and hard labor. On April 21, 1975 the President of South Vietnam resigned in a televised announcement in which he denounced the United States for failing to come to the aid of South Vietnam.

When Nguyen's family fled to the United States, they were placed in one of four Vietnamese refugee camps. The family then spent three years in Pennsylvania before relocating to San Jose, CA.

Nguyen's first memories are of being placed with a family without children and then another with children while the parents "got on their feet." This separation lasted less than a year, but Nguyen remembers feeling confused and abandoned. When Nguyen was reunited with his family, they settled in a community of mostly Vietnamese. Little Saigon in Orange County, CA is the largest Vietnamese community outside of Vietnam. Nguyen's parents made a living by opening a grocery store. When Nguyen

was 10, his parents were shot and wounded during an armed robbery at the grocery store. In a 2016 interview on NPR's *Fresh Air*, Nguyen said this type of violence was common in the immigrant community. Domestic violence was particularly common with men in the community, which Nguyen believed stems from dealing with the stress of underemployment, adjusting to a foreign land and the trauma associated with fleeing war in one's country.

While growing up in San Jose, Nguyen attended St. Patrick School, a Catholic elementary school. For high school, Nguyen went to Bellarmine College Preparatory, which he described as a mostly white school. During that time, he had a small group of Asian friends who called themselves "The Asian Invasion" and "The Yellow Peril." Nguyen said that growing up in America, he identified as an American. After high school, Nguyen went to the University of California Riverside and UCLA, before graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, with a B. A. in English and Ethnic Studies.

Nguyen went on to receive his Ph.D. in English from Berkeley in May 1997. On *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, Nguyen described telling his parents he was getting a doctorate in English and telling them it was a degree like a "doctor" and that he could always go to law school. In 2003, Nguyen became an associate professor in the American Studies and Ethnicity Department. In addition to teaching and writing, Nguyen is the cultural critic-at-large for The Los Angeles Times and is an editor of diaCRITICS, a blog for the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network.

The Sympathizer was Nguyen's debut novel in 2016. According to the 2016 interview on NPR's *Fresh Air*, Nguyen wrote the novel at the suggestion of his publicist. This novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, as well as the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, the Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction from the American Library Association, the Edgar Award for Best First Novel from an American Author from the Mystery Writers of America, and the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature in Fiction from the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association. He was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2017. Nguyen is also a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Nguyen's most recent work is a children's book, co-wrote with his 6 year-old son, Ellison, titled *Chicken of the Sea*. In a published interview on Nguyen's website, his son asked him if he enjoyed writing the book with him. Nguyen said, "Of course! I'd much rather spend time with you making a book than watching you play soccer, baseball, football, basketball, or basically any sport you can imagine. Remember that."

Nguyen's first work of fiction was a collection of short stories titled *The Refugees*. Nguyen described the writing of these stories as "an utterly miserable experience." In an interview in June, 2019, on the American Masters Podcast, Nguyen stated, "I taught myself how to write by writing *The Refugees*. I made a lot of mistakes and writing short stories is actually very, very difficult, at least for me. I don't think I have a natural aptitude for the short story form. But I am very stubborn, and I wanted to finish that book. I felt that I couldn't let the book defeat me, because if it did, I wasn't a real writer. It was simply the struggle of learning how to write, which was crucial, essential,

and it was a very unpleasant experience. But there's no other way to learn to write except to do the experience of writing and learn for yourself the techniques that you need. And also to learn the endurance that's necessary to be a writer. Having suffered through those 17 years, I emerged out of it capable of writing *The Sympathizer*."

Nguyen stated in the interview that his influences in college were authors of literature by people of color: Chicano authors, African-American authors, Asian-American authors. "You know people like Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison, who were major influences on my work, or Maxine Hong Kingston who was actually my teacher as well. Just the pleasure of reading connecting that with the political and social possibilities of literature to address our difficult histories. It was these writers that really became my inspirations and models."

Viet Thanh Nguyen states in a number of interviews that one of the purposes of his work is to communicate the Vietnamese experience of the Vietnam War. When Nguyen was about 10 years-old he watched the movies "Apocalypse Now" and "Platoon." For him, that was one of the first times he felt like the "other," the Gook, the foreigner. Nguyen said "This was really my first moment of real exposure with the depths of American racism. In my own personal life, I had only rarely encountered direct racism to my face. And somehow this moment even though it wasn't personal, it wasn't like an individual doing this to me, it felt intensely personal because I knew that this was being directed at me. Not that I think Coppola was doing it on purpose. I think the power of racism is such that he didn't have to do it on purpose. The assumption could simply

be that Vietnamese people had no speaking role whatsoever in this American imagination. Americans don't think of that as racist, but it is racist."

Joe Skinner, from the *American Masters* podcast, asked Viet Thanh Nguyen why he describes himself as a refugee and not an immigrant. "Americans think of the United States as a country of immigrants whether they like it or not. Americans still fundamentally believe that immigration has happened to this country. Some Americans think it's made the country great some Americans think it's made the country worse. But immigration is still fundamental. So when a newcomer to the United States, or someone who's a newcomer but who's been here for a few decades calls herself or himself an immigrant to other Americans, Americans can immediately make sense out of that whether they like it or not. A refugee is different because a refugee is actually not a part of the American mythology, is not really a part of the American dream. Americans don't generally think of refugees at all and when they encounter refugees they sort of automatically simply subsumed the refugee under the general category of the immigrant which then allows Americans to make sense out of them, because in the American imagination. Immigrants come to this country because of the American dream. America is a great country. The immigrants come here to try to better themselves. That affirms America to Americans, even if they want to kick those immigrants out or keep them from coming. Refugees have to be subsumed under that category for Americans because it makes that American mythology work. But if you were to actually think about the refugee and why the refugees came to this country oftentimes it's because of desperate conditions that the United States helped to create.... But if you call these people

refugees then you have to start thinking about American culpability and American responsibility and then you think it's easier to call them immigrants or undocumented immigrants....So that's why it's been important for me to say I'm a refugee and not an immigrant because I don't want to let Americans off the hook by pretending I'm something I'm not....I want to call myself a refugee so that we can have this conversation about how I happened to come here and how all these Vietnamese refugees happen to be here."

In the interview on *American Masters* podcast, Nguyen was asked if he should be considered an "American Master" since he was now received a Pulitzer Prize for literature. He first stated that he was shocked that he won a Pulitzer. He then went on to say that it was not winning a Pulitzer that makes one an American Master, but rather, "a process of consensus after a struggle, you know like someone like Philip Roth for example. Everybody would call him an American Master now. His period of a struggle sort of happened a long time ago in the 1950s when he was emerging, he was a controversial, you know Jewish-American writer. Now he's just an American writer. Now he's just a global writer... So that's why it's I think it's always critical to recognize canonization for the fraught process that it is, it's very difficult in the contemporary moment to be sure that who we think will be a part of the canon will be a part of the canon.... And part of being an American Master I think is as you said, tied into that notion of who we think of as an American. Take the Philip Roth example. In the 1950s he was Jewish-American. His reputation has changed as the status of people who are Jewish in this country has changed. They've become white for a variety of different

kinds of reasons, and I think that's helped in the process of canonizing Philip Roth and he himself was a part of that transformation of Jewish people into white people.... So that literature can never be divorced from all the social and political struggles that we've had to undergo to contest what it means to be an American and therefore to contest who is allowed into the canon of American culture and can be called an American Master."

Nguyen went on to theorize that the time was right for his book, *The Sympathizer* to get recognition. "I think *The Sympathizer* is a good novel. Whether it's a great novel, time will have to decide that.... You know we are a society based on genocide and conquest and imperialism and slavery and all these kinds of things and we are also a society that's based on this idea that we are above and beyond of those things and how we are above and beyond that is that we allow people like me and N. Scott Momaday to write novels that get the Pulitzer Prize. That's the conundrum that we're in.... Great works of art can be utterly racist because they are expressions of deep racism within the culture. It took me a long time to understand my mission as a writer, besides writing something great hopefully, was to also contest this deep-seated racism at the heart of the canonical tradition."

With the popularity of writers such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, author of *Between the World and Me*, the book and film *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* by Bryan Stephanson and the Black Lives Matter movement, the time does seem right for *The Sympathizer* and for Viet Thanh Nguyen's career as an educator and an agent for social change.

