



Library podcast

Viet Thanh Nguyen discusses 'The Refugees'

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[[00:00:36] Good evening. My name is Rick Simonson and I'm with Elliott Bay Book Company and we are delighted and thrilled to have you here to be here working. Our friends here at the sale of public library since it's our public library. I'm welcoming you here this evening and to say we're grateful you're being here. We would like to thank the Seattle Times and our author series sponsor Gary Kunis for their generous promotional support for the library programs. We're also grateful to the Seattle Public Library Foundation for their support private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors helped the library to provide pre-K programs and services that touched the lives of everyone in our community. So to library foundation donors here with us tonight we say thank you very much for your support. So now I'm pleased to have David Wright who is also one of those wonderful librarians and great presence in many ways. We'll introduce our speaker for the night.

[00:01:28] So thank you.

[00:01:31] We also extend our thanks to the Elliott Bay Book Company for being here and selling these books as well and they're all very good if you don't have all the books. I mean the people that work in Elliott Bay are all very good but the books are even better.

[00:01:43] Okay. Thank you so much for joining us here for tonight's event with yet Tom Nguyen. My name is David Wright. I am a librarian here a few quick words of introduction I want to leave plenty of time for the rest of the event. Dr. Viet Thanh Nguyen received his Ph.D. in English from UC Berkeley. He is a professor of English and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. As I'm sure all of you know his first novel *The Sympathizer* won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize in fiction as well as among other honors the Andrew Carnegie Medal awarded by the American Library Association the Asian Pacific American Award for Literature and an Edgar Allan Poe award which is awarded by the Mystery Writers of America and the breadth of those awards I think gives you some idea of the many facets of this rich and immensely rewarding novel. If I may be just a little personal digression I first read the book when I was serving on a panel of judges for one of those awards the Carnegie awards and judging a literary award is a very curious experience. After reading basically

everything ever written you get to talk about what you read but not like a book group not in a fun way. It's more like a dog fight. It's sort of like two books enter and one book leaves and these were librarians from all around the country very opinionated bunch. It was a very unnatural experience it's not what you want to do with books.

[00:03:15] It's a pit them against each other.

[00:03:17] And I look back very fondly on the sympathizer as one of only two or three books that entire year that basically everybody in this group agreed about. I mean we all had different reasons that we thought it was brilliant.

[00:03:32] But those aside it was we all were in agreement.

[00:03:35] So our conversations about the sympathizer would usually begin or end with kind of yummy sounds over the phone. This was followed by the nonfiction work. Nothing ever dies. Vietnam and the memory of war which is a fantastic companion read to the sympathizer. If your book groups are reading the sympathizer you're not going to be done in one discussion and this is the logical one to follow that up with. If you're not in a book group reading this book will make you feel like you are. It's a wonderfully informative. It clarifies without simplifying which I think is what we really appreciate about Viet's work. And now last but really first because it was written first and certainly not least we have this collection of stories the refugees which is tragically topical and beautifully executed. My understanding from the end to end is that short stories are not his preferred medium that they're somewhat torture to write but I hope that he gets over that because they're brilliant short stories if you haven't read them I urge you to and I hope we have many for more of these to look forward to in all of these titles. The is unapologetic in exploring the controversy and complexity his books embrace the contradictions and inconsistencies among the various stories that we tell about war and remembrance. And he brings to us voices that have not been silent but have seldom been heard so clearly or so well.

[00:05:01] Ladies and gentlemen.

[00:05:02] Viet Thanh Nguyen as well. You started speaking yet. This is awesome. Thanks David.

[00:05:12] The fact that I could please librarians I think is one of the greatest things I ever could have heard because I have tremendous respect for the taste of librarians. Well before I forget first things first here I have to take a picture

[00:05:25] Because I'm Asian.

[00:05:29] Ha ha ha.

[00:05:31] You know it's awesome to be here in Seattle because when I graduated from from Berkeley with my doctorate in English the dream city that I wanted to live in was Seattle and my dream. Yes

[00:05:43] Yes had my dream job was at the University of Washington. And lo and behold a job opened at the University of Washington. And lo and behold I got rejected.

[00:05:57] So I think often about what life could have been if I ended up in my dream city instead of in L.A. Saddam I guess

[00:06:07] But no I mean now I'm completely converted to Los Angeles.

[00:06:10] But you know the journey that took me to this hope to be at the University of Washington to be a professor to be a writer really partially began in libraries which is another reason why it's so awesome to be here at the Seattle Public Library. And the reason why libraries are so important to me is that I came to the United States as a refugee at four years old in 1975 and I didn't speak English. My parents spoke a little bit of English. They read a little bit of English but they certainly weren't in the capacity to do things like teach me English or read me books at night. But they did have the time to take me to the public library or to the bookmobile in Harrisburg Pennsylvania. And it was there that I really started to appreciate English. It was there that I began to appreciate the power of ideas of words of stories of narratives and by the time I moved to San Jose California in 1978 my parents opened possibly the second Vietnamese American grocery store in that city. I began to really be conscious of what it meant to be a refugee because my parents lived the typical refugee shopkeeper lifestyle which meant they worked 12 to 14 hour days every day of the week almost every day of the year and they were working that hard in order to protect my brother and me to help us survive as refugees in this country.

[00:07:40] And that meant they didn't they didn't have time to stand with me. So my second home was the San Jose Public Library. The Martin Luther King Junior branch of the Santa Jose Public Library I would go there every Sunday. By 10 years old I was going there by myself on the bus and I would bring back a backpack full of books and that would be what would sustain me for the rest of the week. So the library became my second home and the imagination became my real country. And the reason I think about it so often today is because as a writer and as a professor as a scholar my business is in stories and I try to tell my students that stories are important they're important not just because they're entertaining when you encounter them in books or when you encounter them in movies they're in. They're important because they actually define who we are. They define what we what we mean when we say we have a community what we mean when we say we have a nation what we mean when we say we belong to the world and right now we're living in a moment in which the triumphant story for some people is Make America Great Again.

[00:08:41] And for me that's not the story that I believe in but I know that that's a story that has persuaded so many Americans and I want my students to believe that they can also participate in telling these kinds of stories that it's their responsibility to contests these kinds of stories because

America was never great for people like me and if I have a mission in my life as a storyteller and as a writer it is to try to make America great and to try to make America aware of the history that it has been involved in that has brought people like me to the United States. So when the sympathizer came out there was a lot of press about it being an immigrant novel and me being an immigrant writer and an immigrant success story. And none of those descriptions are actually true because I'm a refugee and there's a real crucial distinction between being a refugee and an immigrant. And I have to keep saying it over and over and over again because what I'm doing is contesting a very deeply held belief that is a part of the American mythology which is that immigrants can become a part of America.

[00:09:47] They're a part of the American mythology. They're part of the American dream. We welcome immigrants and they make America great but refugees are not immigrants.

[00:09:56] And so I want to read to you not from the refugees first but from an essay that I published in The Financial Times a few weeks ago called America and me that addresses what my refugee background is about because I've often been asked to talk about being a refugee. And so here I'm going to give you a few few details of my life.

[00:10:16] I'm a refugee an American and a human being which is important to the plane as there are many who think these identities cannot be reconciled. In March 1975 as Saigon was about to fall or on the brink of liberation depending on your point of view my humanity was temporarily put into question as I became a refugee my family lived in Ban Me Thuot, famous for its coffee and for being the first town overrun by communist invasion. My father was in Saigon on business and my mother had no way to contact him. She took my 10 year old brother and four year old me and we walked 184 kilometers to the nearest port in Nha Trang. I admit to possibly being carried. At least it was downhill At least I was too young, unlike my brother to remember the dead paratroopers hanging from the trees. I'm grateful not to remember the terror and the chaos that must have been involved in finding a boat. We made it to Saigon and reunited with my father and a month later when the communists arrived. We repeated the mad scramble for our lives. That summer we arrived in America I came to understand that in the United States land at the fabled American dream it is un-American to be a refugee if you remember Hurricane Katrina and all those people who are displaced from their homes in the media covered it. And some of the media said these people are refugees. Well the response from President Bush was that it's un-American to call these people refugees. And the response from Jesse Jackson the only time he probably ever agreed with George Bush was that it's racist to call African-Americans refugees which left me in an impossible situation as a refugee. The refugee embodies fear failure and flight. Americans of all kinds believe that it is impossible for an American to become a refugee although it is possible for refugees to become Americans.

[00:12:30] And in that way be elevated one step closer to heaven. The average American or European who feels that refugees or immigrants threaten their jobs does not recognize that the real culprits for their economic plight are the corporate interests and individuals that want to take the profits and are perfectly happy to see the struggling pitted against each other the economic interests of the unwanted and the fearful middle classes are aligned.

[00:12:58] But so many can't see that because of how much they fear the different the refugee the immigrant in its most naked form. This is racism in a more polite form. It takes the shape of defending one's culture where one would rather remain economically poor but ethnically pure. This fear is a powerful force and I admit to being afraid of it then I think of my parents who are younger than me when they lost nearly everything and became refugees. I can't help but remember how. After we settled in San Jose California and my parents opened that grocery store in the run town downtown a neighboring store put a sign in the window. Another American driven out of business by the Vietnamese but my parents did not give into fear even though they must have been afraid and I think of my son nearly the age I was when I became a refugee. And while I do not want him to be afraid I know he will be. What is important is that he had the strength to overcome his fear and the way to overcome fear is to demand the America that should be and can be the America that dreams the best version of itself so that is the nonfiction version of the biography and the ideas that informs a book like the refugees.

[00:14:32] When I was growing up in Santo Jose I felt myself split in two because I was a refugee and I was an American regardless of what George Bush said regardless of what Jesse Jackson said. I was an American and I was also a refugee.

[00:14:48] So when I was in my parents household and they were Vietnamese I was an American spy observing their strange customs and their strange foods the strange language and when I was outside in the rest of the American world I was a Vietnamese spy observing the strangeness of Americans and the weird things that they did. So that is not a situation that most people want to be in it's a situation of discomfort but it's also a situation of possibility because it allowed me to see things from two sides. It allowed me to see America from the inside and the outside it allowed me to see Vietnamese Americans from the inside and the outside. And that is the kind of vision that I think we need if we can only see the world from one perspective. That's what allows us to say Make America Great Again if we can see America from two points of view.

[00:15:46] And if we can recognize that the United States is both the land of the American dream and the land of genocide slavery and colonialism then we have a better grasp of the reality and the contradictions that we're confronting so in the refugees I set out to write. I know when I was growing up I realized that Vietnamese people the Vietnamese Americans and refugees that I knew were full of stories they could never stop telling stories and these stories were saturated with pain and bitterness and loss and melancholy and regret

[00:16:25] And sometimes rarely with happiness but it didn't matter how many stories that we had the rest of America didn't want to hear them because when Americans said Vietnam they meant the Vietnam War and when they said the Vietnam War they meant the American war.

[00:16:41] So growing up as an American boy obsessed with war I watch all those John Wayne movies and then I watched all the American war movies made about the Vietnam War which is not an exercise I recommend to anybody and it became very clear to me that in the American imagination

the only place for the Vietnamese was to be in the background was to be silenced. And if we had an opportunity to make a sound it was to scream or to say thank you for being rescued and I wasn't going to scream and I wasn't going to say thank you. I wanted to write stories about Vietnamese people that would demonstrate their humanity their complexity and bring them to the forefront of the American imagination. So the sympathizer is one effort to do that. The refugees is another effort to do that. And I'm just gonna read from the opening of the book from a story called black eyed women and it is a story about haunting and anybody who is a refugee anybody who has survived a war anybody who has survived a traumatic experience is haunted black eyed women. Fame which strikes someone usually the kind that healthy minded people would not wish upon themselves such as being kidnapped and kept prisoner for years humiliated in a sex scandal or surviving something typically fatal these survivors needed someone to help write their memoirs and their agents might eventually come across me at least your name's not on anything. My mother once said when I mentioned that I would not mind being thanked in the acknowledgments she said let me tell you a story.

[00:18:34] It would be the first time I heard this story not the last in our homeland. She went on there was a reporter who said the government tortured the people in prison. So the government does to him exactly what he said they did to others. They send him away and no one ever sees him again. That's what happens to writers who put their names on things sounds like something my mom would say to me too. By the time Victor Devoto chose me I had resigned myself to being one of those writers whose names did not appear on book covers. His agent had given him a book that I had ghost written. Its ostensible author the father of a boy who had shot and killed several people at his school I identify with a father's guilt. Victor said to me he was the sole survivor of an airplane crash. One hundred and seventy three others having perished including his wife and children what was left of him appeared on all the talk shows his body there but not much else the voice was a soft monotone and the eyes on the occasions they looked up seemed to hold within them the silhouettes of mournful people his publisher said that it was urgent that he finish his story while audiences still remember the tragedy and this was my preoccupation on the day my dead brother returned to me my mother woke me while it was still dark outside and said don't be afraid.

[00:20:15] Through my open door the light from the hallway stung. Why would I be afraid. When she said My brother's name I did not think of my brother. He had died long ago I closed my eyes and said I did not know anyone by that name. But she persisted.

[00:20:36] He's here to see us. She said stripping off my covers and tugging at me until I rose eyes half shut. She was sixty three moderately forgetful and when she led me to the living room and cried out I was not surprised. He was right here she said kneeling by the arm chair as she felt the carpet, its wet. She crawled to the front door in her cotton pajamas following the trail when I touched the carpet. It was damp for a moment. I twitched in belief in the silence of the house at 4:00 in the morning felt ominous then I noticed a sound of rainwater in the gutters in the fear that had gripped my neck relaxed its hold. My mother must have opened the door gotten drenched. Then come back inside. I knelt by her as she crouched next to the door her hand on the knob and said You're imagining things. I know what I saw brushing my hand off her shoulder. She stood up anger illuminating her dark eyes. He walked he talked. He wanted to see you then where is he ma.

[00:21:48] I don't see anyone of course you don't. She sighed as if I were the one unable to grasp the obvious. He's a ghost isn't he.

[00:22:00] And I don't even like ghost stories. I'm easily frightened. The story took me 50 drafts over 17 years. Story that almost broke me but because I wasn't broken I became a writer ever since my father died a few years ago. My mother and I lived together politely we shared a passion for words but I preferred the silence of writing. While she loved to talk she constantly fed me gossip and stories. The only kind I enjoyed concerning my father back when he was a man. I did not know young and happy. Then came the stories of terror like the one about the reporter. The moral being that life like the police enjoys beating people now and again. Finally there was our favorite kind the ghost story of which she knew many some firsthand. Aunt Six died of a heart attack at 76. She told me once twice or perhaps three times repetition being her habit. I never took her stories seriously she lived in Vung Tau and when we were in Nha Trang. I was bringing them to the table when I saw Aunt Six sitting there in her nightgown. Her long gray hair, which she usually wore in a chignon, was loose and fell over her shoulders and in her face. I almost dropped the dishes.

[00:23:29] When I asked her what she was doing here, she just smiled. She stood up, kissed me, and turned me toward the kitchen. When I turned around again to see her, she was gone. It was her ghost. Uncle confirmed it when I called. She had passed away that morning, in her own bed. Aunt Six died a good death, according to my mother, at home and with family, her ghost simply making the rounds to say farewell. My mother repeated her aunt's story while we sat at the kitchen table the morning she claimed to have seen my brother, her son. I had brewed her a pot of green tea and taken her temperature despite her protests, the result being, as she had predicted, normal. Waving the thermometer at me, she said he must have disappeared because he was tired. After all, he had just completed a journey of thousands of miles across the Pacific. So how did he get here? He swam. She gave me a pitying look. That's why he was wet. He was an excellent swimmer, I said, humoring her.

[00:24:46] What did he look like? Exactly the same. It's been twenty-five years. He hasn't changed at all? They always look exactly the same as when you last saw them. I remembered how he looked the last time, and any humor that I felt vanished.

[00:25:11] The stunned look on his face, the open eyes that did not inch even with the splintered board of the boat's deck pressing against his cheek

[00:25:21] I did not want to see him again assuming there was something or someone to see after my mother left for her shift at the salon I tried to go back to sleep but could not.

[00:25:35] His eyes stared at me whenever I closed my own. Only now was I conscious of not having remembered him for months. I had long struggled to forget him, but just by turning a corner in the world or in my mind I could run into him, my best friend. From as far back as I can recall, I could hear his voice outside our house, calling my name. That was my signal to follow him down our village's

lanes and pathways, through jackfruit and mango groves to the dikes and fields, dodging shattered palm trees and bomb craters.

[00:26:14] At the time this was a normal childhood. Looking back, however, I could see that we had passed our youth in a haunted country.

[00:26:25] Our father had been drafted and we feared that he would never return before he left. He had dug a bomb shelter next to our home a sandbagged bunker whose roof was braced by timber even though it was hot and airless dank with the odor of the earth and alive with the movement of the worms. We often went to play there as little children when we were older we went to study and tell stories. I was the best student in my school excellent enough for my teacher to teach me English. After hours lessons I shared with my brother.

[00:27:01] He in turn told me tall tales, folklore and rumors. When airplanes shrieked overhead and we huddled with my mother in the bunker.2844

[00:27:12] He whispered ghost stories in my ear to distract me except insisted they were not those stories they were historical accounts from reliable sources the ancient crones who chewed betel nut and spat its red juice while squatting on their haunches in the market tending coal stoves or overseeing baskets of wares. Our lands confirmed residents they said included the upper half of a Korean Lieutenant launched by a mine into the branches of a rubber tree scalped black American floating in the creek not far from his downed helicopter. His eyes and exposed half moon of his brain glistening above the water and a decapitated Japanese private groping through a cast of a shrubbery for his head these invaders came to conquer our land and now would never go home. The old lady said cackling and exposing lacquered teeth or so my brother told me I shivered with delight in the gloom here in those black eyed women with my own ears and it seemed to me that I would never tell stories like those and now comes my favorite part of the evening conversation.

[00:28:44] I love to get questions from the audience and hear what you have to say including criticisms if you have that in mind. The question was that you know we tend to think of refugees as a temporary stage and what what part of me still remains a refugee. Right. You know when I was four years old and I came to the United States you know I went to this refugee camp called Fort Indian town gap Pennsylvania. There were for these military bases where the refugees were put. And for most of us in order to leave one of these camps we had of a sponsor to make sure that we weren't going to drain you know American welfare so for whatever reason there was no single sponsor that would take my entire family of four. So one sponsor took my my parents one sponsor took my 10 year old brother and one sponsor took me. And it was a very nice white family who took me. But at four years old I wasn't going to be able to articulate that what I felt was that I was being taken away from my parents howling and screaming. And this was my entry way into my into memory. This is when I started to remember and be able to tell stories to myself and that experience has remained an invisible brand stamped between my shoulder blades and yes if you look at me now you can't tell that I'm a refugee. I have made a successful transition from refugee to bourgeoisie right.

[00:30:06] From camps to clubs.

[00:30:09] I'm invited into all kinds of clubs that would never have admitted me when I was a refugee. I've given talks in the Ronald Reagan reading room.

[00:30:18] I am the successful avatar of the American dream and of American possibility but and you're right.

[00:30:27] Obviously no one wants to be a refugee forever. By definition to be a refugee is to be unwanted to live in limbo to be in a refugee camp to be kept on the edge of starvation to live in your own excrement and filth so no I don't want to be a refugee but I want to keep alive the memory of what that felt like to be a refugee because I don't ever want to be an insider completely. It's a psychological habit of mine that I think is really crucial.

[00:30:56] Once you're an insider completely you become like these Vietnamese American refugees who are no longer refugees who look at the Syrians and the Muslims and say keep them out.

[00:31:10] We're the good refugees.

[00:31:11] They're the bad refugees.

[00:31:18] The Vietnamese have have a parable about how we're like crabs in a barrel crab climbs to fly too high up the barrel you pull them back in but the opposite is also true some Vietnamese people after they've gotten up the ladder want to put the ladder up behind them. I totally cannot get with that and I. That's why it's important to remember what it's like to be an outsider what it's like to be a refugee because those who have forgotten what it's like to be a refugee think that they deserve what they've gotten the membership card to the American dream. When in reality the Vietnamese refugees who made it in just got lucky. Because there was a moment when American foreign policy said it's to our advantage to bring in Vietnamese refugees it makes us feel better and it makes us look good during the moment of the Cold War.

[00:32:11] But that same moment when we were letting Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees in. We were saying no to Haitians I wonder why so that's why it's important for those who are once refugees never to forget that experience so that it can we can remember what it feels like so that we can then feel for those refugees asking to come in. The question was having come to this country as a refugee and as a result of American war and involvement in Southeast Asia. And despite having become successful is there any hidden resentment towards America.

[00:32:56] If you read the sympathizer the resentment is there on the page.

[00:33:03] I mean look there are people there are you know most of the people who write to me via email or lesser hearts letters and postcards are very positive.

[00:33:13] But there is a segment of people who've written to me who say you're anti-American you're ungrateful especially veterans especially certain fan full of veterans.

[00:33:26] You know we sacrifice for you. Why aren't you grateful for what you have. And the last letter that I got from a very educated man a doctor and a dentist said you don't deserve to raise your son here go back to your Utopian Vietnam and he didn't ever you know obviously never finish reading the novel because if you read the novel it is not utopia in Vietnam but I feel that

[00:33:50] Those kinds of responses miss the point they divide the world into us versus them. They say you either are with us or against us you're either grateful or resentful and the whole point of the sympathizer was to see every issue from both sides to acknowledge it.

[00:34:09] There is no country no community no ideology that is not rife with contradiction. Vietnam no exception. The United States no exception. That's why I said we have to be able to acknowledge both the American dream and the American nightmare at the same time. That's what the sympathizer does which is why in that novel I set out to try to offend everybody equal opportunity right. Because everybody is implicated in these contradictions. And in the case of the United States yes there is resentment in the sympathizer. And yet there's also this great fascination and love for American culture as well.

[00:34:46] And that also defines me.

[00:34:51] The question was How do I manage the plot along with all the personal historic material that that's happening. That's actually a question that's relevant for both the sympathizer and the refugees because I dealt with them in different ways. Given that the refugees are short stories and the sympathizer is a longer novel and the harder part was actually with the sympathizer with the refugees the reason it took me 17 years to write that book and go through a lot of pain which you will never experience because most people can read this book in about five or six hours and think wow that must be really easy to write Viet what are you talking about.

[00:35:27] But it took a long time precisely because I couldn't figure out how to bring together the plots of the stories with all the historical information because I had so much history that I wanted to talk about and what I had to learn in writing short stories with how to throw away 90 percent of that history. So in the refugees it doesn't seem like a very political book because the stories are very much about the intimate lives of people. There are domestic situations there emotional travails all the history is in the background and that's why when I wrote the dedication to the book I felt this is my one moment to make sure that people don't miss the political point that's latent in all of these stories. And so the dedication is for all refugees everywhere. But all that's in the background. And typically that's what we see in short stories that we have to give up that history and try to figure out how the history manifests itself domestically just within the fabric of people's lives.

[00:36:29] Then when I got to the sympathizer I realized I'm much more naturally a novelist because with the novel and with all that space that I had then I could throw in all the politics and all the history

and then the challenge there was how do I make sure that doesn't interfere with the plot. And the crucial trick there was to come up with a protagonist who logically could think about all of these political and historical questions. So when they surface it wouldn't seem as if it's via the author just dropping his lecture into the middle of the story. So I had to create an alter ego in the protagonist. He's not me but emotionally intellectually he's a part of me that I've exaggerated greatly and he can reasonably have

[00:37:17] These kinds of political ideas and thoughts that I put into him. Maybe there's somebody way way up in the backing that I can't see I want look up there now and he's ok. So yeah. Okay. Go ahead.

[00:37:34] What does my son think when I speak about my childhood as a refugee.

[00:37:37] He's three and a half. He's thinking. He's either thinking batman or give me a treat. And I'm sure when he's 12 he'll be thinking the same things when I break out the refugees story I'm trying to indoctrinate him young I take him to my book launches and I took him to a book launch right before I went on my last leg of the book tour and then I was on the tour and my my wife called me and she said he's imitating you he's pretending he's signing books.

[00:38:08] When he's old enough. I.

[00:38:11] Do you want to talk to him about Mom and Dad's refugee experiences because my wife is also a refugee and about ông bà nội, the grandparents on both sides and what they went through because he's going to grow up regardless of what I do regardless if I make him chop wood in the backyard he's going to grow up a coddled middle class American. All right. It's been very hard to overcome that and

[00:38:35] That's seriously right. My parents didn't have to try to make me not coddled you know you just had to like oh my parents just got shot at the grocery store. That's reality that's not going to happen I hope to my son you know.

[00:38:47] So I want him to know about this history so that he never becomes the kind of American who would believe that we should make America great again. And if refugee knowledge inoculates him from that I'm gonna give that to him whether he wants to hear it or not. Yes sir in the shirt there almost anything we'll do in the age of Trump you know. I was I'm an optimist you know I had to write this by the book interview for the New York Times and one question was What do you recommend for the president to read and I was like ok god damn it I know I know the answer is he doesn't know how to read write and

[00:39:36] What Roxane Gay basically said that she is not that I can recommend that if this man is going to read but I said ok ok. I said ok.

[00:39:42] President Obama should read the New Testament the Old Testament and he who shall not be named should read the New Testament. If he is a Christian because there you learn about humility and sacrifice in serving the poor and washing the feet of the outsider and all that. So but what what should we read what what should we read.

[00:40:02] We should keep on reading anything that activates the imagination that activates our empathy that activates our capacity to see the world from a viewpoint that is completely alien from us. And that's actually kind of a challenge because it's actually I think for many of us it feels natural to read books that reflect our experience back to ourselves. What that means that we're white and we read about white people or we're men and we read about men and and so on. In my case one of the crucial experiences of my life that also turned me into a writer was that when I went to college I became an ethnic studies major.

[00:40:43] And I had gone to college as an English major and the reason why I became an English major was that I love to read and I didn't know what else I was gonna do. You know it's like ok I liked Jane Austen I like to remind people it's a mystery college and I'll do read more of that kind of stuff and I'll kill time for four years one having a good time until I figure out what I'm going to do politically become a lawyer I could make a lawyer joke but right now the lawyers are saving our lives at this moment.

[00:41:12] So I became an ethnic studies major and I read literature Chicano literature, Asian-American literature, African-American literature.

[00:41:20] And for the first time I thought oh literature can actually be about people like me. And when I said people like me I met partially Asian Americans, Asian immigrants, Vietnamese people but I also met other people of color who shared a historical similarity in being outsiders who had been locked out of the American dream and the American story. And that is a kind of empathy to empathize with those who are outsiders and to realize that if we really thought about it we could all be outsiders as well. And that's what we need to do. We need to recognize what we're naturally drawn to and we need to step away from that and read books read stories that will challenge our assumptions of who we are.

[00:42:08] How is my relationship with Vietnam changed over the years and is there are there any plans for translation. Well you know I left in 1975 didn't really know anything about Vietnam and so my exposure to Vietnam was growing up in a Vietnamese refugee community with my parents and feeling really alienated because during that time period you know you had if you were in a Vietnamese refugee community it was intensely Vietnamese. People had lost their country and they wanted to hang on intensely to the language to their customs to their songs to their war to their military. And I didn't identify with any of that because I felt again like an outsider everywhere I turned I was an outsider I was an outsider to American culture because I thought I can't watch apocalypse now and identify with American soldiers when they're killing Vietnamese people that divided me into. But if I was skeptical of American nationalism and patriotism I couldn't simply then turn to the Vietnamese community and identify with their nationalism and patriotism. And so for me Vietnam was

that I didn't go back to Vietnam until 2002 as a tourist. And that was I thought I still had relatives in Vietnam but I think I did not want to meet them on that first trip because I knew it would be so so difficult.

[00:43:24] So I went back as a tourist for two weeks and I partied and it was great. I recommend anybody. That's the way you get your entree into Vietnam or go back to Vietnam have some fun first and then you get to the serious business of getting beneath the surface. And so from 2002 to 2012 I went back five or six times and spent a total about a year there and had very you know I studied the language and I traveled throughout the country to look at how the Vietnamese were dealing with their economics and their politics and their history and their memory. And I got some sense of the complexities of what the Vietnamese people thought and felt and I discovered that I really really really can't stand the weather in Vietnam and

[00:44:03] The food off almost makes it worthwhile but not quite so right now.

[00:44:08] You know the last time I was in Vietnam was in 2012 I was in Hanoi and I was running the sympathizer. And I haven't returned partially because I just wanna go somewhere fun for once when I go overseas but also because I don't know what they're going to what the government's going to say when I show up at the doorstep say Hi I'm Viet. I wrote the sympathizer of the book you won't let back into the country about me. And so the translation is underway for all three books and I don't know how they're gonna get it passed censorship. They sent the sympathizer you know like cut off the last quarter of the novel that really says some bad things about the Communist Party and the communist government. And the only reason I agreed to do the translation with the governor wasn't with a Vietnamese publishing houses because I had a I had a fan who was Vietnamese American he was in Vietnam and he had very high level government connections and he said Look I know I know what this level is thinking they're liberalizing they won't open up the country you should try it. And so it got me the connection. But now that government has been deposed and there's new government in power. So I don't know what's going to happen and the plan I think is that there's a clause in my contract that says if the translation is censored censored in any way I get my translation back. So we'll see if they respect that and if they don't I'll release it myself over the Internet for free which was always my assumption because I thought if I published this book in Vietnam or in Vietnamese is I'm not gonna make any money anyway because the Vietnamese are just going to pirate the book. And

[00:45:37] How we do. So

[00:45:40] That's reality. Okay.

[00:45:42] In the back over there the question was about how the sympathizer as the section satirizing Apocalypse Now and of course it is partially about Apocalypse Now as you read the acknowledgements you realize that I read every book available about Francis Ford Coppola in Apocalypse Now but it's also a satirization of the entire Hollywood Vietnam War genre.

[00:46:02] And the question was do you think it's now that I live in L.A. and on the edge of Hollywood. Do you think it's possible for Hollywood to make an adaptation of this in one way or another. And I have no idea. You know I'm starting to I have had these conversations with directors and actors and so on and you know they've been extended negotiations and flirtations about whether to turn it into a book. I mean turned it into a movie or a television series. And I've I thought that it would make a good television series because when I wrote the sympathizer from 2011 to 2013 I actually had not watched television for a decade during that two year period. I didn't have anything else to do but write. And so at night I would watch televisions I watch all the TV series I've gotten hot over the previous decade the Sopranos Mad Men The Wire The Shield. And so the structure of the television dramatic series was the structure that I used for the sympathizer. There's 26 chapters and they're all almost exactly the same length

[00:47:02] Made plotting a lot easier when I didn't have to worry about individual chapters in their form.

[00:47:06] So that would be the dream you know. But there's some people who think it should be a movie and and I just don't. I mean if you make it into movie you have to throw out half the book now which half you throw out in which half you keep and what do you emphasize and what don't you emphasize. And that's the potential for Hollywood to come in and then really do something horrible to the novel which I guess would only be poetic justice for me.

[00:47:26] Yeah. And even more so if it was like it was like Sofia Sofia Coppola who did it right.

[00:47:31] Yeah. Yes yes. Yeah.

[00:47:36] Is there any way to bridge Vietnamese Communists and Vietnamese Americans. Yeah I resist even using the term Vietnamese communists because you know you're talking about 90 million people in Vietnam right now. Right. And they're not communists. Most of them like like maybe 2 million belong to the Communist Party and even those people aren't communists right. They they the leadership of the Communist Party is like the leadership of every other ideological faction. They're in it for the power the ideologies is just an excuse. And that's why the the leadership of the Communist Party mirrors the leadership of the rabid anti-Communist faction of the Vietnamese American people. They're that mirror image of each other. And I talk about that in the sympathizer right. If you talk about the people most of the time the people just want to get along. Most of the Vietnamese Americans in this country may not like communism but they're perfectly happy to buy the tourist ticket to Vietnam and have a good time because they want to get along and meet their families and the people most and most of the people in Vietnam don't care anything about communism.

[00:48:32] If communism makes them wealthy they'll go along with it if capitalism makes them wealthy they'll go along with that too and that's what we need to recognize. We shouldn't be talking about what do we think about the Vietnamese communists when we're really talking about 89 million Vietnamese people who don't care one way or the other about communism. How do you bridge the gap you become. I think you you challenge that narrative of that's the Viet Cong. That's the

Communists that's the V.C. We can't have relationships with them. You're letting the leadership one faction of the leadership of the Vietnamese American community steer the debate and keep us keeping us trapped in the past. Now you have to acknowledge the past. You have to acknowledge history. But if you do that it can't simply be it can seem to be your version of history.

[00:49:13] Everybody wants to simply acknowledge their version of history when people say always remember never forget what they're really saying is always remember never forget what happened to me. What happened to you I don't care about if I did something bad to you I guess I'll talk about that now and that's what happens in both the Vietnamese Communist Party and the anti-communist. Vietnamese population here and in every other factional divide you can imagine. So if we want to talk about the past in history let's really talk about it. Let's talk about the terrible things the communists did and then let's talk about the terrible things the Americans did and then let's talk about the terrible things the Southern Vietnamese anti-communist did too. Can you do that if you can do that then we can have an honest relationship to history. Until then you can't tell me that we have to hate the communists. We have an acknowledged things that we ourselves did.

[00:50:00] Two more questions. Yes sir okay.

[00:50:04] So the very nice question a lot of flattery, i'll keep. Keep on giving it to me.

[00:50:11] You know I've been a lot of national talk shows and TV and stuff and yes the Seth Myers appearance was/will probably be forever the height of my coolness and do I feel a lot of pressure to be the spokesperson for the Vietnamese American community. Yes. And that is despite the fact that I've tried my damndest not to be the spokesperson for the Vietnamese American community when when the novel came out the sympathizer got a great review on the front page of The New York Times by a great author. But unfortunately in the second line or so of the review he said basically Viet is the voice for the voiceless.

[00:50:50] And if you know anything about Vietnamese people you know we're not voiceless.

[00:50:56] We talk a lot we talk loudly. We don't shut up. The problem is. Other people don't want to hear it.

[00:51:04] So to be someone like me who publishes a book and then people say oh now we finally have a novel or a book that speaks for Vietnamese Americans completely ignores the fact that there are 20 to 30 to 40 other books already written by Vietnamese Americans in English that you could read.

[00:51:23] All you gotta do is do a google search but people people who want to do that then I'm the flavor of the month right.

[00:51:31] Maybe five years from now there'll be somebody else who will come out and we'll become the new voice for the Vietnamese peoples. I really resist that because what it means is that it allows

people to ignore the whole diversity of the Vietnamese community and Vietnamese voices and let's say let's call Viet and asked what he thinks. But unfortunately that's what people do. So now I am a professional Vietnamese and I am a professional refugee and that totally sucks you know because I don't want to be those things but I realize that because I got this award and because people we live in a world where people care about awards that all of a sudden they wanna hear what I have to say even though what I have to say is exactly what I had to say before the award when no one cared what I had to say. So I have to take advantage of the platform to do my best but I don't think of myself as the spokesperson because I'm saying things up here right now that a lot of Vietnamese people would not agree with. They would probably if I wasn't here if I went into Little Saigon in Orange County picket me and protest me for saying the things that I have said to you tonight.

[00:52:34] Right so I'm a very dangerous spokesperson for the Vietnamese community. And so I try to constantly at least be reflexive and make people aware that I don't speak for the Vietnamese American community even as I'm speaking for the Vietnamese American community. Tricky act to pull off. But really the most important thing he said is I'm funny and well-dressed.

[00:52:54] You didn't say anything about my hair. That's also very important to me. It's been a lot of time on the hair. Yes in the middle.

[00:53:04] Do I agree with my dad. Hell no. Does he agree with me. I doubt it. But you know it's really funny.

[00:53:10] I just talked to a couple of nights ago and the first thing he said one of the first things he said was that he was actually reading my books. I thought that's pretty cool. I didn't ask him what he thought. You know. At one point one of my stories was translated into Vietnamese a while ago and a story called the other man in this book the refugees and it's about a Vietnamese refugee who comes to San Francisco in 1975 and discovers that he is gay. I give out sort of my dad. He's a devout Catholic and he never said anything to me about it ever. So I will wait for him to come at me with an opinion. But funny thing the other part of the conversation was about how much he thought Donald Trump was an idiot.

[00:53:48] And I thought cool. Now we can agree on something. Well on that note thank you very much for coming.

[00:54:03] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.