



Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War

By Viet Thanh Nguyen



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Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War By Viet Thanh Nguyen

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.



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Editorial Review

Review

[Nguyen] produces close readings of the novels, films, monuments, and prisons that form ‘the identity of war’ in Vietnam, ‘a face with carefully drawn features, familiar at a glance to the nation’s people.’ Nguyen draws insights from Levinas, Ricoeur, and other philosophers, and his approach has affinities with that of hybridists such as W. G. Sebald and Maggie Nelson. The book is also notable for its inclusivity, addressing Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, and Korean experiences and the competition for narrative dominance in bookstores and box offices. (*New Yorker* 2016-05-09)

In *Nothing Ever Dies*, Nguyen has written a powerful meditation on the manner in which memories are produced, cultivated, even empowered and subdued...He’s a lucid and robust voice for the forgotten?forgotten people, forgotten places, and forgotten memories most of all...*Nothing Ever Dies* is one man’s powerful entreaty to a country which has seen nearly endless conflict (one war running upon the next) for generations. (Matthew Snider *PopMatters* 2016-05-25)

Readers will discover the roots of Nguyen’s powerful fiction in this profoundly incisive and bracing investigation into the memory of war and how war stories are shaped and disseminated...Ultimately, Nguyen’s lucid, arresting, and richly sourced inquiry, in the mode of Susan Sontag and W. G. Sebald, is a call for true and just stories of war and its perpetual legacy. (Donna Seaman *Booklist (starred review)* 2016-04-01)

Nguyen’s work is a powerful reflection on how we choose to remember and forget. (*Kirkus Reviews* 2016-01-15)

This thought-provoking book is recommended for all students of the Vietnam War and those interested in historical memory. (Joshua Wallace *Library Journal* 2016-03-01)

[An] eloquent...narrative of the Vietnam War’s psychological impact on combatants and civilians...This is primarily a work that comes to grips with memory and identity through the arts...Nguyen succeeds in delivering a potent critique of the war and revealing what the memories of living have meant for the identities of the next generation. (*Publishers Weekly* 2016-05-16)

Is there hope for an ethics of memory, or for peace? *Nothing Ever Dies* reveals that, in our collective memories of conflict, we are still fighting the Forever War. Nguyen’s distinctive voice blends ideas with family history in a way that is original, unique, exciting. A vitally important book. (Maxine Hong Kingston, author of *To Be a Poet*)

Inspired by the author’s personal odyssey, informed by his wide-ranging exploration of literature, film, and art, this is a provocative and moving meditation on the ethics of remembering and forgetting. Rooted in the Vietnam War and its aftermath, it speaks to all who have been displaced by war and revolution, and carry with them memories, whether their own or of others, private or collective, that are freighted with nostalgia, guilt, and trauma. (Hue-Tam Ho Tai, editor of *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*)

Nothing Ever Dies provides the fullest and best explanation of how the Vietnam War has become so deeply

inscribed into national memory. Nguyen's elegant prose is at once deeply personal, sweepingly panoramic, and hauntingly evocative. (Ari Kelman, author of *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek*)

Beautifully written, powerfully argued, thoughtful, provocative. (Marilyn B. Young, author of *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*)

In *Nothing Ever Dies*, his unusually thoughtful consideration of war, self-deception and forgiveness, Viet Thanh Nguyen penetrates deeply into memories of the Vietnamese war...[An] important book, which hits hard at self-serving myths. (Jonathan Mirsky *Literary Review* 2016-07-01)

By taking the reader on a sweeping and sobering global tour of artifacts, places, art, texts, and monuments associated with Vietnam, Nguyen argues that our cultural need to reflect accurately upon our history and fully absorb its lessons is forever at war with the impossibility of ever fully knowing the truth, or retelling it accurately...Cautioning that we cannot remember what we do not see, he lists the ways in which the U.S. has failed to fully recognize its own role in Vietnam, let alone the Vietnamese citizens it ostensibly went to Vietnam to protect...It's fitting that *Nothing Ever Dies* has emerged at a moment when the U.S. and most of Europe are fiercely questioning America's ability to reconcile with the past. Nguyen might say that the only way we can truly acknowledge the past is to contend with how fallible our memories actually are. (Aja Romano *Vox* 2016-11-16)

Nothing Ever Dies is an account of humanity at its darkest, a realm of war, memory, identity and pain that ventures from the jungles of Vietnam to the killing fields of Cambodia. (Jeffrey Fleishman *Los Angeles Times* 2016-11-14)

A penetrating analysis by the Pulitzer Prize-winning Nguyen on how the Vietnam War has been remembered by the countries and people that have been most affected by it. (*Listener* 2016-11-26)

In this elegantly written book, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Nguyen offers a comprehensive, balanced analysis of how the Vietnam War has been remembered and forgotten?both privately and collectively...Examining a medley of cultural forms?novels, monuments, cemeteries, souvenirs, video games, photography, museum exhibits, and movies?Nguyen calls attention to the inequality in the industrial production of memory and to the power of art to disable future wars. One of the book's most original?and perhaps controversial?arguments is that to avoid simplifying the other, people need to recognize both their humanity and their ever-present inhumanity and those of others as well. (Y. L. Espiritu *Choice* 2016-11-01)

About the Author

Viet Thanh Nguyen is Aerol Arnold Chair of English and Associate Professor of English and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. His novel *The Sympathizer* won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Antoine Dejean:

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