

Annotated Bibliography of Books About Vietnam

Here's a list of great books about Vietnam, many focused on the country and the culture and a few about the war. For more books about the war, there are a zillion websites out there.

Fiction: Novels

The Gangster We Are All Looking For

by le thi diem thuy

thuy, a Vietnamese-American performance artist as well as a writer, has developed a style of non-linear storytelling that is almost like poetry. In this account of one Vietnamese immigrant family's experiences in America, the tiniest details—the color of a swimming pool, the cut of a man's suit—lead the reader to a deeper understanding of the most complex, and often heartbreaking, emotions.

The Book of Salt

by Monique Truong

Truong, a first-generation Vietnamese-American, has written a novel that examines the lives of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas from a very intriguing perspective: that of the Vietnamese cook who worked for them in their home in France. By contrasting his very personal point of view with what we know of their public lives, Truong throws light on the figures who remain in the background of history, but whose own private stories can be equally captivating.

Grass Roof, Tin Roof and The Gentle Order of Girls and Boy

by Dao Strom

Strom, who also grew up in the United States, writes in a style that is graceful and beautiful to read. Her characters are both complicated and utterly believable. Her stories illuminate the experience of being non-white in America, but, more importantly, they illuminate the experience of being *human* in America, an experience to which everyone can relate, but not every author can capture with so much intelligence, wit, and luminous detail.

Paradise of the Blind

By Duong Thu Huong

Huong, one of Vietnam's leading writers and a well-known dissident there, presents a view of post-war Vietnam that is both barren of joy and rich with the textures of every day existence. The story is a testament to the waste and corruption that followed the hardship of war, but it's also brimming with details that will make you yearn to go there. Nobody can write about Vietnamese food like Huong can. Also, try *Novel Without a Name* (about the war years) and *Memories of a Pure Spring*, by the same author.

The Sorrow of War

By Bao Ninh

In my classes on Vietnamese literature, I like to pair Bao Ninh's *Sorrow of War* with Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. There's no better way to recognize the commonality of the tragedy suffered by Vietnamese and American soldiers during the war than to read these books and see the startling similarities in their accounts of hopelessness, alienation, and despair. Bao Ninh's story of the soldier Kien is a beautifully written, and angry, testament to how much the Vietnamese people suffered, not only at the hands of Americans but also at the hands of their own leaders.

The Quiet American

by Graham Greene

This novel sets a captivating story of love and espionage against the backdrop of a Vietnam few non-Vietnamese ever had a chance to see—Saigon in the years just before the United States got involved there. The place has changed so much since then, but one only has to step into one of the old cafes in downtown Ho Chi Minh City to get a feel of what Greene experienced way back then.

The Women on the Island

By Ho Anh Thai

Thai's surreal novel looks at how the years of war in Vietnam affected the Vietnamese people, women in particular. Centered on Cat Ba Island off the coast of Vietnam, the story examines how, after having struggled for years to achieve Vietnam's victory in the war, a group of women find that their country at peace has no place for them.

Fiction: Short Stories

The Stars, The Earth, The River: Short Fiction by Le Minh Khue

By Le Minh Khue

I translated this book, along with Bac Hoai Tran, so I'm partial to it, but I'm not alone among its fans. This story collection contains work by one of Vietnam's leading fiction writers, some of which date back to the war years and others of which were written more recently. The early stories, particularly the charming "The Distant Stars," are quite romantic in their view of wartime Vietnam. Later stories show a sharp change in tone, as Khue reveals the disappointments of the post-war era. Sarcastic, biting, and often full of pathos, Khue's stories present Vietnam today in all its richness and complexity.

Fake House: Stories by Linh Dinh

By Linh Dinh

This collection of stories by Vietnamese-American prize-winning poet Linh Dinh offer an acerbic, insightful look at life among Vietnamese immigrants in the United States. Kirkus reviews noted the stories' "vividly imagined characters" and the author Jessica Hagedorn called Linh "a unique voice in contemporary American literature."

Crossing the River: Short Fiction by Nguyen Huy Thiep

By Nguyen Huy Thiep

This collection, which I edited with Nguyen Nguyet Cam, is the most comprehensive edition ever published in English of work by Thiep, acclaimed as Vietnam's most provocative and controversial contemporary writer. Widely diverse in form as well as content, these stories offer a broad and complicated view of Vietnam, from the eerie mountain villages of the Thai and Muong minority people to the stark and brutal lives of rural farmers to the cut-throat existence of city dwellers who will do anything to get by. If you're really interested in understanding Vietnam, you have to read Thiep.

The Things They Carried

By Tim O'Brien

Maybe the most wrenching, heartbreaking account of war, ever. O'Brien writes so beautifully that you almost forget how horrifying his story is. Also, try *Going After Cacciato*.

We Should Never Meet: Stories

by Aimee Phan

In this series of lively, often gripping interlocking stories, Vietnamese-American Phan explores the peculiar experience of the Vietnamese children, now adults, who were brought over on Operation Babylift, the U.S.-led effort to evacuate them from war-torn Saigon and place them with adoptive families overseas.

Fiction: Anthologies

The Other Side of Heaven: Post-war Fiction by Vietnamese and American Writers

One of the first American books since the end of the war to include writing by contemporary Vietnamese authors, *The Other Side of Heaven* is something of a sampler of good writing from Vietnam. It also includes work from American writers who have written about that period in American history, including Tim O'Brien, Wayne Karlin, Robert Olen Butler, and Bobbie Ann Mason.

Night, Again: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam

Edited by Linh Dinh

A wonderful collection of writing by some of Vietnam's best contemporary writers. Linh has a quirky taste for fiction and he's picked some of the edgiest work to come out of the country today. Highlights include Nguyen Huy Thiep's "Without a King" and "Nine Down Makes Ten" by Pham Thi Hoai.

Vietnam: A Traveller's Literary Companion

Edited by John Balaban and Nguyen Qui Duc

This collection, put together specifically with the traveller in mind, offers a vivid portrait of Vietnam, from the hectic life of Ho Chi Minh City in the South to the rural villages of the Red River Delta in the North. Highlights include Pham Thi Hoai's hilarious and

surprisingly moving “The Saigon Tailor Shop” and Nguyen Huy Thiep’s “Remembrance of the Countryside.”

Folktales

Two Cakes Fit for a King: Folktales from Vietnam

Collected by Nguyen Nguyet Cam and Dana Sachs; introduced and illustrated by Bui Hoai Mai

This collection of folktales introduces an English-speaking audience to Vietnam’s expansive and enthralling oral tradition. From the legend of how the watermelon became a part of Vietnamese cuisine to the tale of a poor, lovelorn fisherman with an exquisite voice, these stories give a taste of the vast range of stories within Vietnam’s traditional culture. The book contains beautiful illustrations by Hanoi painter Bui Hoai Mai.

Poetry

The Tale of Kieu

By Nguyen Du, translated and annotated by Huynh Sanh Thong

This long narrative poem is Vietnam’s great literary epic, learned in school and quoted in Vietnamese daily life in much the same way that English-speakers learn and love Shakespeare. It’s also a terrific adventure story about an ill-fated heroine and her attempts to find happiness and true love. Huynh Sanh Thong’s bilingual, annotated edition provides both an exquisite rendering of the verse and fascinating asides about Vietnamese language and culture.

Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong

By Ho Xuan Huong, translated by John Balaban

Ho Xuan Huong was an 18th-century concubine and poet. Her poetry, written in the ancient *nom* script, is both subtly erotic and brazenly straightforward in its articulation of the injustice of her world. This collection is outstanding, not only because of Huong’s gorgeous poetry, but also because the translator and editors took the trouble to produce a trilingual edition—in English, Vietnamese, and *nom* itself. It’s a treasure for scholars and anyone who wants to see (if not read) the original script. When Bill Clinton became the first American president to visit post-war Vietnam, in 1999, he included an homage to Huong in one of the speeches he gave there. You only have to read a couple of these poems to understand why.

The Women Carry River Water

By Nguyen Quang Thieu, translated by Martha Collins and Nguyen Quang Thieu

This bilingual edition of poems by contemporary Vietnamese poet Nguyen Quang Thieu presents a vivid, often agonizing portrait of Vietnam today, during the war, and in the now-remote past of the poet’s youth.

Non-fiction: Memoir

The House on Dream Street: Memoir of An American Woman in Vietnam

By Dana Sachs

For more information on my memoir, see the BOOKS section of danasachs.com.

When Heaven and Earth Changed Places and Child of War, Woman of Peace

By Le Ly Hayslip, with Jay Wurtz

As the old saying goes, “When elephants and rhinos fight, it’s the flies and mosquitoes that suffer.” Le Ly Hayslip’s story of growing up in war-torn Vietnam provides what may be the best example yet of how ordinary civilians suffered, caught in the middle of a bloody war without an allegiance to any ideology. The memoir is a terrific page-turner, alternately heartbreaking and uplifting. Hayslip’s sequel, *Child of War, Woman of Peace* describes her emigration to America and her attempt to make a life for herself and her children here.

Where the Ashes Are: The Odyssey of a Vietnamese Family

By Nguyen Qui Duc

This memoir offers an intertwined account of the fate of one formerly privileged South Vietnamese family just before and following the end of the war. While the young Duc fled to the United States and spent his teenage years growing up in California, his father spent years in a North Vietnamese prison camp writing poetry, and his mother, a one-time teacher, struggled to provide for her family in Ho Chi Minh City by selling noodles on the streets. The author Gloria Emerson called *Where the Ashes Are* an “exceptional and haunting memoir.”

Dispatches

By Michael Herr

Michael Herr’s classic account of the war in Vietnam, mostly told from the frontlines, is a testament to the ridiculousness of the situation and the waste of human life. It’s beautifully written and completely absorbing, even now, more than three decades after it first appeared. A reviewer for [The New York Times](http://www.nytimes.com) said, “It’s as if Dante had gone to hell with a cassette recording of Jimi Hendrix and a pocketful of pills: Our first rock and roll war. Stunning!”

Understanding Vietnam

By Neil Jamieson

Jamieson’s study offers a detailed, thoughtful look at Vietnamese history, culture, and traditions. In *The New York Times*, Herbert Mitgang said that *Understanding Vietnam* “Discloses what the American military and political leadership largely misunderstood: the nature of Vietnamese society, the confrontation with colonialism and Western values, the resistance of the intellectuals, and the culture of the people.”

Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam

By Andrew X. Pham

Pham's beautifully written memoir mixes an account of a solo bicycle journey along the Pacific Rim with a story of family, identity, and returning to roots. Winner of the prestigious Kiriyama Prize.

Shadows and Wind: A View of Modern Vietnam

By Robert Templer

Templer, a former correspondent for Agence France-Presse, has written a sharp, perceptive, extremely well-researched account of contemporary Vietnam. Few writers have been willing to look at this subject so honestly and the result is both unsparing and enlightening.

A Vietcong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and its Aftermath

By Truong Nhu Tang

Even if you're not particularly interested in details of the war, it will be hard to resist this account by a former Viet Cong minister of justice, the highest Viet Cong official to go into exile. Truong's story reveals in telling detail the harsh reality of life for the Viet Cong, and it also gives a comprehensive description of political bickering, turmoil, and heroism behind the lines. It's a gripping story, extremely revealing and hard to put down.

The Girl in the Picture

By Denise Chong

A well-told and interesting biography of the life of Kim Phuc, the little Vietnamese girl whose agony became world famous when a photographer captured her running down a rural road after a U.S. warplane dropped napalm on her and her village. The book is particularly provocative, and at times infuriating, when it explores the peculiar intersection between Kim Phuc's private life and her status as Vietnam's most famous war victim.

A Sense of Duty: My Father, My American Journey

By Quang X. Pham

An account of a Vietnamese-American immigrant growing up in the United States after fleeing Vietnam as a young boy. While Pham's father remained imprisoned in Vietnamese re-education camps, the rest of the family struggled to make a new life in America. The story also details Pham's experiences as a U.S. soldier during the First Gulf War.

Photography Books

Vietnam: A Portrait

By Lou Dematteis

Dematteis book, for which I wrote the captions and a short accompanying essay, presents a stark, surprising portrait of contemporary Vietnam. From a shot of a bride and groom

celebrating their wedding to a look at AIDS patients in an ill-equipped hospital, Dematteis captures contemporary Vietnam with both beauty and candor.

Hanoi: Biography of a City

By William S. Logan

For fans of Vietnam's great capital city, nothing could be better than this informative, nicely designed collection of photographs and history. The photographs of contemporary Hanoi show a city on the verge of reinventing itself, while the pictures of Old Hanoi demonstrate how, in some important ways, the city hasn't changed that much at all.

Guidebooks

To Asia with Love: A Connoisseur's Guide to Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam
edited by Kim Fay

Granted, you're going to want your Lonely Planet, or Frommer's, or whatever series you like, to bring along with you when you travel to a new country, but you should consider bringing this one along as well. Fay, the editor, asked dozens of expats who have made their homes in Southeast Asia to describe the places and things they love best about their adopted countries. The result is To Asia with Love, the first in a series that promises to soon offer an entire volume on Vietnam. For the time being, you can content yourself with the more general one, which offers a host of tips for having wonderful, out-of-the-ordinary, off-the-beaten-track experiences in Vietnam. It also includes tips on how you can help the countries that you visit through acts of charity or volunteering.