

ON the
SAME
PAGE

May 2020
Featured
APIA Month
Selection

THE MOUNTAINS SING

by Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai



San Francisco Public Library

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San Francisco Reads



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WHY WE LOVE *The Mountains Sing*

Dear Reader,

Our next Spotlight title brings us into new territory for the hoopla Book Club and, indeed, for many Western readers. The author of *The Mountains Sing*, Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, is a Vietnamese poet and author of eight books, and this is her first novel in English. There is of course a rich literary culture of Vietnamese-American writers active today, including luminaries like Viet Thanh Nguyen and Thi Bui, but Quế Mai is one of a relative few authors now bringing Vietnamese literature to a wider English-speaking audience, and to me her story felt like opening a door in a way I've rarely experienced before in a book.

Her novel spans the harrowing 20th century history of Vietnam through the experience of the Trần family. We see them face the catastrophe of the Vietnam War as well as the violence of the Great Hunger and the Land Reform, which are deeply felt as trauma and loss rippling through the pages and across time between the generations. This provided at once a chance to pierce the lens of my own Western understanding of the Vietnam War and a lesson in how important perspective is to any historical knowledge, while also experiencing these massive upheavals with all the nuance of her character's personal struggles and victories.

In fact, her powerful characterizations were another main pull for us to this title. As many reviewers have noted, Quế Mai delivers a novel that is epic in scope, but it also offers a poet's evocative language that brings it all to vivid life. As the novel seems to move from one tragedy to another, we see how the characters' lives are bent to the rough will of history and irrevocably changed by forces outside of their control. However, we also see one family's bond that sustains, and gives meaning and hope to lives that may have been lost without it. Particularly the relationship between Hương (young Guava) and her grandmother Diệu Lan is a moving testament to the meaning of family, especially in the worst of times, and provides the emotional core of a book that is moving in its display of resilience as much as its exploration of the atrocities of war.

We highly recommend this title for your next book club and hope you'll read along with us. Let us know what you think @hoopladigital, and join the online discussion using #hooplalbookclub.

- Tara Carberry, hoopla digital



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About the Author

Born into the Vietnam War in 1973, Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai grew up witnessing the war's devastation and its aftermath. She worked as a street seller and rice farmer before winning a scholarship to attend university in Australia. She is the author of eight books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction published in Vietnamese, and her writing has been translated and published in more than ten countries, most recently in Norton's *Inheriting the War* anthology. She has been honored with many awards, including the Poetry of the Year 2010 Award from the Hà Nội Writers Association, as well as many grants and fellowships. Married to a European diplomat, Quế Mai is currently living in Jakarta with her two teenage children. For more information about Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, visit her at www.nguyenphanquemail.com.



Selected Praise

"[A] lyrical, sweeping debut novel...Nguyễn brilliantly explores the boundary between what a writer shares with the world and what remains between family.

This brilliant, unsparing love letter to Vietnam will move readers."

—**Publishers Weekly, starred review**

"Expansive in scope and feeling, *The Mountains Sing* is a feat of hope, an unflinchingly felt inquiry into the past, with the courageous storytelling of the present."

—**Ocean Vuong, author of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous***

"Recalling Min Jin Lee and Lisa See, Nguyen displays a lush and captivating storyteller's gift as she effortlessly transports readers to another world..."

—**Library Journal, starred review**

"Quế Mai tells the story of the war that tore apart Việt Nam, and of the generation lost to the war, by braiding around it two beautiful strands told by the older and younger generations of a family. This book is an act of love, compassion, and ultimately healing, and very much needed by all who survived the war."

—**Thi Bui, author of *The Best We Could Do***

"Invitingly and gracefully told...A richly imagined story of severed bonds amid conflict."

—**Kirkus Reviews, starred review**

"Balances the unrelenting devastation of war with redemptive moments of surprising humanity."

—**Booklist**

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