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BOOK CLUB

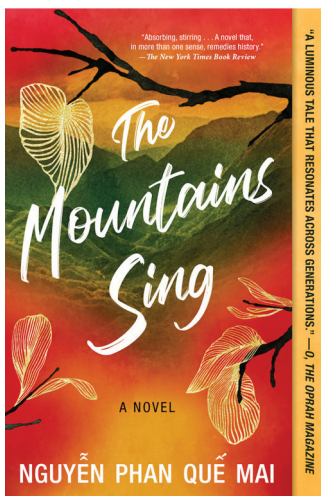
FOPSL Book Club: March 18, 2022

Book: *The Mountains Sing*

Author: Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai

Discussion leader: Mary Torres

Discussion summary: Lisa Walters



Mary started the discussion by giving us information about the author, born in 1973 near the end of the Vietnam War. The book is partly autobiographical, as the author wrote about things that happened in her own family. However, she didn't actually know her grandmother, who died before Nguyen was born, and she said that she wrote the book because she

“wanted to find” her. She based that character partly on her own mother, who sang as the fictional grandmother did. Nguyen also worked in a hospital in Hanoi and saw babies born deformed as a result of Agent Orange, as happened to a member of the narrators' family.

The book covers a total of 50 years of the turbulent history of Vietnam in a very compressed manner, using both the young main character and her grandmother as alternating narrators of different time periods. Most agreed that the grandmother was a convincing, believable character, and some thought that the scenes of her walking to Hanoi and leaving her children along the way for their own safety were especially memorable.

We discussed the author's background as a poet and the use of language in the novel. Of particular interest were the proverbs sprinkled throughout the narrative.

Using proverbs is reportedly a common practice of the Vietnamese people: to respond to a question or a situation with a proverb. A few members mentioned picking up some Vietnamese words, and more than one thought that having a list of characters' names at the beginning of the book would have been helpful to those of us not familiar with the language.

We also discussed the role of ritual, religion, and traditions: that these are constants that can bring comfort in a time of turmoil and change. It was posited that culture, as well as people, can be destroyed during a war, and that those trying to take over a culture will often bomb churches, museums, and statues in an effort to obliterate that culture. Even within the family of this novel, politics has driven people apart, as seen in the characters of Uncle Sang, who wants to be a Communist, and the grandmother, who rails against Communism.

Many people mentioned that it was hard to read a story of the horrors of war when we are watching the same thing on the television news every day, but most said they appreciated reading about a culture we knew little about. These comparisons with the current situation in Ukraine were inevitable, as were our own memories of the Vietnam War. It seemed harder for the characters in this book to accept the actions of other Vietnamese people than those of Americans. The character of the grandmother mentions several times that the Americans are not all bad. The author wants to establish a voice for peace and writes about how in times of crisis, people are kind, and that Americans came back later to help rebuild. Showing Vietnamese people reading and finding common ground with characters in American books showed that people of all cultures can find a connection through literature. The author's main message was that if our stories survive, we won't die.

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