



Viet Thanh Nguyen, Writer America Through My Eyes

Lesson Introduction

Interview Log: Interviewed on June 8, 2023 by David Bender

- Access *The Thread* episode of Viet Thanh Nguyen on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- Access his long-form interview on [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)

Learning Objectives

Social Studies Focus

- Examine the Vietnamese refugee experience through in the context of the Vietnam War, the fall of Saigon, and the Cold War
- Reflect on the consequences of war and trauma through a first-hand testimonial
- Explore how cultural identity influences the experience of assimilation in America
- Examine different perspectives on what it means to be an American

English Language Arts Focus

- Examine the writing process from the point of view of one writer
- Analyze the structure and purpose of a narrative, identify the key themes in this episode, and synthesize information from a spoken text
- Discuss different perspectives on the title “American Through My Eyes”
- Use Viet Thanh Nguyen’s episode as evidence to write a rhetorical essay on an assigned topic

Episode Overview

Winner of both a MacArthur Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship, Viet Thanh Nguyen is a modern-day Tocqueville. He arrived in America as a four-year-old refugee after the 1975 fall of Saigon and has gone on to become one of our nation’s most distinguished novelists and academics. His visceral and unsparing observations about his adopted country earned him *The New Yorker* magazine’s accolade as “a conscience of American literature.” Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his first novel, *The Sympathizer* (recently adapted as a critically acclaimed HBO miniseries co starring Robert Downey, Jr.), Professor Viet Thanh Nguyen honors us with a candidly personal interview on this unique and timely episode of *The Thread*.



Biography

Viet Thanh Nguyen is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and literary scholar. Born in Buôn Mê Thuật, Vietnam and raised in the U.S., his family was among the 130,000 refugees who fled to the U.S. after the Vietnam War in 1975. Nguyen went on to earn degrees in English and Ethnic Studies from UC Berkeley, followed by a Ph.D. in English. His debut novel, *The Sympathizer*, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize. He’s also the author of *The Refugees*, the nonfiction *Nothing Ever Dies*—a finalist for the National Book Award—and the children’s book *Chicken of the Sea*, co-written with his son Ellison and illustrated by Thi Bui and Hien Bui-Stafford. Nguyen serves on the boards of the Pulitzer Prizes and the International Rescue Committee, while championing Vietnamese diaspora arts through DVAN and diaCRITICS.



Teaching Tip: First Take

A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode’s opening.

Suggested Steps

- Watch and then read aloud the opening of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s episode with students:

“With my novel *The Sympathizer*, for about two-thirds of the way through the novel the character behaved sort of like what I thought he would do in my own mind, rationally. And then in the last third, something came out of him that I didn’t know about, like there was a secret buried in his past that I didn’t even know existed. And so that was really powerful for me that, in creating a character, he had a depth to him that I didn’t anticipate.”



- Ask and Discuss: What do you learn about Viet Thanh Nguyen as a writer from these opening sentences? What insights can you infer?
- Next, as a class, discuss the role of “the opening” in any form of storytelling – an interview, film, play, or song. What is their point of view on why the filmmakers chose this as the opening for the episode? What ideas, topics, or themes may the filmmakers be foreshadowing?
- Last, have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on how the opening connects with the episode’s title “America Through My Eyes.” Have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.



Photos: During the Aloud series at the Los Angeles Central Library author Viet Thanh Nguyen poses for a portrait with his book *The Sympathizer* on May 24, 2016 in Los Angeles, California. (Photo by Gary Leonard/Getty Images) top; Two unidentified actors run April 28, 1976 during the filming of ‘Apocalypse Now’ in the Philippines. The movie was directed by Francis Ford Coppola and based on the book ‘Heart of Darkness’ by Joseph Conrad. It took sixteen months to complete filming instead of the original six weeks. (Photo by Dirck Halstead/Getty Images) lower left; Anti-Vietnam war protest and demonstration in front of the White House in support of singer Eartha Kitt on January 19, 1968. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington) lower right



Teaching Tip:

The Thread Up Close

Step One: Watch Viet Thanh Nguyen’s episode “America Through My Eyes” here. Next, have students discuss and debrief the episode using these suggested questions:

- ▣ What do you learn about the Vietnamese refugee experience from this episode?
- ▣ How does Viet Thanh Nguyen speak about his relationship to his parents and his childhood as a Vietnamese-American?
- ▣ Nguyen acknowledges the trauma his parents experienced as refugees and its effect on his upbringing. What stood out to you about these stories?
- ▣ How has becoming a father been a transformative experience for Nguyen?
- ▣ What role does writing and storytelling play in his Vietnamese-American identity?

Step Two: After discussing the questions in Step One, have students return to *The Thread* episode and engage in a close read and analysis of his interview using the transcript and video as a reference. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning *The Thread* with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of a *Thread* lesson connection: If you are asking students to explore the theme of love, share this passage from Viet Thanh Nguyen’s interview as a point of departure:

“I don’t know if I ever heard the words “I love you” in my family. Which is not unusual for Vietnamese people. I remember the first times people ever said I love you to me, I couldn’t say anything. I was like, “Why? Why are these people saying they love me?”

Connections: *The Thread Up Close*

- ▣ How do you show and express love?
- ▣ Can you identify factors that inhibited Nguyen from expressing love? How did meeting his wife and having children transform his experience of love?
- ▣ Has your family’s life been shaped by recent historical events? How?
- ▣ What did you learn about the creative process from this episode?
- ▣ Do you think art can be both a form of creative expression and of political resistance? How?
- ▣ What new insight did you learn about (yourself, your community, your world) from his stories?



Activity: America Through My Eyes

1: Have students read this excerpt from Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *Thread* episode (edited for clarity and brevity) and underline words and phrases that they think explain America through his eyes.

“The mystery of what it means to be an American has always been present for me. I think a lot of Americans realize there’s been a conflict between our ideals and what we’ve actually done. Part of the rhetoric of what it means to be an American is that we are an imperfect union and we will strive to be better. For refugees and immigrants who come to the United States, there’s a huge incentive to believe in that rhetoric and to want to become a part of this country. But for me, I think to become a part of this country also requires a certain degree of amnesia about the past and an acceptance of one of the core mythologies of this country, which is that we’re a nation of individuals and that the past doesn’t really matter. So on the one hand, we’re a country that celebrates our diversity most of the time, but we’re also a country that celebrates our individualism. This is a big cultural and political problem because how do you reconcile the two? How can you be a nation of millions of individuals, but then also be a nation of plural cultures? Trying to figure out who I am as a writer, I try to figure out who I am as an American; they’re both related projects. I go back to the origins of the United States, that to me are a deep contradiction between the beauty and the hope of our democracy and the brutality and the horror of the genocide, enslavement, the colonization that have been there since the very beginnings. We are never going to get away from that, actually, and so that’s where my art is born from and that’s where I think that we both have to strive to be individuals, but we have to strive to recognize that our connections emerge out of this basic contradiction of our history.”

2: After completing this exercise, choose one phrase or sentence you agree with and mark it with an “A”; one you want to discuss and mark it with a “?” and “!”; and one you disagree with and mark it with a !

3: Invite students to share their choices and discuss their different points of view.

Extended learning: Using the title “America Through My Eyes” as a prompt, have students write a rhetorical essay of 500 words explaining America through their eyes.



Additional Resources

- ▣ [Viet Thanh Nguyen](#) - official website
- ▣ Read about Viet Thanh Nguyen being awarded The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2016 for [The Sympathizer](#)

