Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

VIET THANH NGUYEN INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON TWO

Viet Thanh Nguyen, Author
July 8, 2023
Interviewed by: David Bender
Total Running Time: 31 min and 47 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Presents

VIET THANH NGUYEN:
With my novel The Sympathizer, for about two thirds of the way through the novel that 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 that character, he had a depth to him that I didn't anticipate.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
The Thread
Viet Thanh Nguyen
Author

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INTERVIEWER:

Your own first four years were in Vietnam. I've read that it's hard for you to really remember that. You have stories told. But let me ask you, your mother got you and your brother onto a boat. Talk to me about how you have a sense of that now, retrospectively, and particularly since you've had four-year-olds.

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VIET THANH NGUYEN:

So my earliest memories start at around four years of age in a refugee camp in Pennsylvania, which is where my family ended up in the summer of 1975. And I think that that was probably a traumatic experience, obviously, for my parents, also for me, because my earliest memories are being taken away from my parents at four years of age, because in order to leave the refugee camp, we had to have American sponsor us and no American was willing to sponsor all four of us. So my parents went with one sponsor, my brother went with one, and I went with another. So my earliest memories are howling and screaming as I'm being taken away from my parents. And I think the way that I coped with that was to constantly look forward. I wasn't going to look back. I wasn't going to look back at this trauma. And my way of coping was just to tell myself it didn't really matter, and I wasn't traumatized by it. And so that's how I pretty much function, particularly the next four decades of my life. And then I had become a father and I had a child, my son. And then when he turned four years of age, it was also around the time that the Trump administration had a border policy where they were separating children from their parents and losing them. And as that was happening, I was looking at

my son and then I was forced to think back to myself at four years of age and wonder, what did that feel like? What was that like for me? What was that like for my parents to have their child taken away from them, even for benevolent reasons? And then looking at that, it started to force me to think about how probably that trauma left its mark on me in ways that I never really understood and shaped me in ways that I never understood. Like, maybe that was why I had problems emotionally connecting with people because of my fear of being separated from people that I loved. But it also forced me to think about this mystery of childhood that for most of us, we don't know what our first two or three or four years is like, but when we're parents, we look at our children and we can see that in these moments are so emotionally powerful for children and for their parents. So what is that mystery like? And so some of my writing in retrospect, after that moment of seeing my son at four years of age and thinking about myself, has been thinking about how much emotion takes place in these early years and shape us in ways that we will never really comprehend.

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INTERVIEWER:
You talk about the fact that you never thought of yourself as having a sense of humor. What was it that caused you not to come to humor easily?

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VIET THANH NGUYEN:
Some people have remarked that my novel, *The Sympathizer*, is a pretty funny novel, which I hope it is. But also people who know me have remarked that

they never thought I was a funny person. And I think the reason for this is because I was raised as a Catholic, by very devout Vietnamese Catholic parents who were also refugees and who were born in the North of Vietnam, which has a reputation of just being a very serious place. So I was raised in a very serious, humorless environment where I had the sense that our lives were at stake. You know, we had to work really hard. We couldn't have any fun because we had to make our way here in this country, but also my parents had to support all their relatives back in Vietnam. So that was the atmosphere that I was raised in. Everything was so serious. And so I was never allowed, I think, to laugh in the house. And I think the manifestation of early signs of humor were that I was probably a very smart-aleck-y kid. I remember my supervisor at work when I was 16 years old tell me you're too smart for your own good. And so I was a wise ass and, you know, had a lot of opinions that were probably not warranted given my lack of maturity. But that was probably an early indicator that there was something inside of me that was struggling to get out this internal voice of disobedience and and disrespect for authority. Being a novelist, let me unleash this voice within myself.

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INTERVIEWER:
Were your parents taken aback when you suddenly were smart-aleck-y, was that difficult?

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VIET THANH NGUYEN:

I was raised with very strict expectations by my parents that I be respectable, hardworking and so on and so forth. And in my mind, that was exactly what I was. So it took me by surprise when my older brother said, “Mom and dad think you're the disobedient one, the rebel.” And I was like, “Really?” I think I do everything my parents asked me to do. So I think that we just had very different perceptions of who I was, my parents and me. But, you know, I don't think they've ever read my fiction. I don't think they've ever read anything I've written so far as I know, we don't talk about that kind of thing. I think that my life as a writer has been a secret from my parents, because even when I won this prize for a book called Lester The Cat when I was eight years old and I went to the public library to get the award, my parents didn't go. They were working in their grocery store. So I'm not even sure I told them that I was getting a prize, but they certainly couldn't have taken me. So my school librarian took me to get that prize. So even from an early age, my writing life was a secret. And even when I became a successful novelist, my parents were proud of the accomplishment of my being a novelist, getting prizes, but they weren't reading the work. So I don't know if they ever thought of my life as a writer as any kind of a rebellion against them since they only were aware of the public prestige, but not of the actual content of the works, which were much more controversial.

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INTERVIEWER:
You said something about you didn't understand your own capacity for love until it was your love for your own children. Did you not feel that for your

sibling who stayed with or your parents — do you not feel the same kind of love as you feel for your wife and children?

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VIET THANH NGUYEN:
I think the issue of love has always been deeply puzzling for me because I grew up in this family of people who were very reticent emotionally, and I don't think that was unusual for the culture in the time of Vietnamese refugees. And the expression of love was through action, through sacrifice, through obedience, things like this. And that's how I express love for my parents and vice versa. And that was always a very conflicted love, because it was all wrapped up in things like teenage rebellion and cultural differences growing up as an American versus my Vietnamese parents, and also complicated by the traumas that they underwent and that I witnessed and I was affected by, which led me to feel that I didn't know what love was because I never — I don't know if I ever heard the words I love you in my family, which is not unusual for Vietnamese people. And so I remember the first times people ever said, "I love you," to me, I was like, I couldn't say anything. I was like, why? Why are these people saying they love me? I don't really know what love is. So I was very confused by that. And so that confusion was wrapped up in the family life and the refugee experience. And so I think it really took striking out on my own as an adult, finding my future wife, learning how to love in that way with another person, and then my children learning how to give them love, learning how to be proactive in saying "I love you," but also giving physical, affectionate love to these people that I cared about. Those acts were really transformative for me. And so I

think that I did know how to love, but it was the love for my parents and my family, was expressed in a very, very different way than I've learned how to express it to my own children and to my wife. And, there's still issues there because my brother, for example, after my mother passed away, my brother said, "I love you." He hadn't said that maybe in 30 or 40 years, and again, I was like, "Hmm, this is hard!" I had to will myself to say, "I love you," to my brother back. We do love each other, but again, just the capacity to even say that has been so difficult.

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INTERVIEWER:
As a parent, are you learning from your own children?

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VIET THANH NGUYEN:
It's been amazing that in having children I have learned from my kids. Because I'm kind of a skeptic and a cynic, so previously before I had kids, when people say, "I learned so much from my children," it's like, "Yeah, sure." But in fact, it's true. I think what I've learned from my children is that their playfulness is actually something that many adults, including myself, have forgotten. Literally forgotten because we don't remember how we were, we were two or three or four years of age. And as a writer, looking at my children and their playfulness has been actually really transformative. Because when I see my children play or when they create, it's purely for the sake of play and creation. Whereas as an adult, when I learned how to create, it was about not just about the playfulness and the creation, it was that, well, am I going to get

a book contract or are the reviews going to be good? Is a book going to sell? And when you're a child, none of that really matters. You're just invested in the playfulness and the creativity, and there are no boundaries. Whereas as an adult, at least for me, it has been a process of learning boundaries, both for good reasons, but also in terms of about how things are supposed to be done creatively. Like, a novel is supposed to look like this. And when I look at my children and they create stuff, those boundaries don't exist. And when I read children's literature with them, I'm struck by how few boundaries there are, that this animating spirit for children's literature, but for children themselves, seems to me to be partly wrapped up in this question of, "Why not? Why can't we do this or why can't we do that?" And that's an enormously powerful question. And so after my children, I feel that my writing has actually taken a different turn because I've been able to ask myself, "Why not?" When I run into a convention, for example, in novel writing, like, "Why not? Why can't I? Why can't I make my prose look like poetry? Why does prose have to look like prose and why? What are these definitions?" And so it's been powerful for me to just be able to just do new things in my writing that I wouldn't have been able to imagine myself doing before kids.

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INTERVIEWER:
Obviously now, one of the things that so informs you, and we are talking about purpose, is making those connections between communities and shared experience, even though it doesn't seem like it is the importance of understanding that diversity is actually not a separation, but a connection.

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VIET THANH NGUYEN:

You know I've spent a lot of my life thinking about what it means to be an American because I came to the United States as a refugee from a war that was obviously terribly damaging, both for Americans but also for Vietnamese people as well. So the mystery of what it means to be an American has always been present for me. And I think for a lot of Americans, because I think a lot of Americans realize, there's been a conflict between our ideals and what we've actually done. And certainly part of the rhetoric of what it means to be an American for a lot of people is that we are an imperfect union and we will strive to be better. And 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. And this is a big cultural and political problem for us, 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? So I think that's a big tension and it's one that I've tried to work through. And for me, I think that that tension is also a part of my art. Like, art is an expression of the individual. There's no doubt about it. But then I believe in art as also being a part of collectives and communities as well. And so for me, in both trying to figure out who I am as a writer, I also try to figure out who I am as an American to both related projects. And so I go back to the origins of the United States that to me, the origins of the United States

are a deep contradiction--between the beauty and the hope of our democracy and the brutality and the horror of the genocide, the enslavement, the colonization that have been there since the very beginnings. And we are never going to get away from that, actually, is my belief. And so that's why — 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 build these- to recognize that our connections emerge out of this basic contradiction of our history.

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INTERVIEWER:
Can you talk to me about, specifically from the point of view of the Vietnamese American community, how that relates, and the tension, a lot of racism that exists? How do you address that?

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VIET THANH NGUYEN:
So I think of myself partly as a utopian kind of person. I try to imagine what our world could possibly look like in a thousand or 2000 years versus what we looked like two or 3000 years earlier. And that time frame is a little- It's quite different than thinking about who we are 100 years from now or 100 years previously. But in the larger view, let's say a few thousand years, I think about how we've gone from societies where people were killing each other because they came from different villages or they were separated by a hundred miles or something. And now we've come to a situation where we kill each other because of nations. That's not great, but it's better. You know, it's better. And but that tension, even within the nation, whether it's Vietnam

or the United States, is that even within a nation that has a coherent national identity, there are still differences inside. But we have reached moments where people are trying to forge these national identities that overcome differences. And my utopian thinking is, well if we can do that, if we can have a United States where different ethnicities can sort of get along, why can't we have a world where different nationalities can get along? And when you say stuff like that, people are like, "Oh, no, that's too utopian. We have to have borders and so on." Look, well, you know, yes, but we didn't have these borders in the past. So I think we have to strive for the utopia of a thousand or 2000 years from now, where we can imagine one day being American or being Vietnamese,--these are identities that we fought bloody wars over, but maybe in the future, a thousand or 2000 years from now, it'll just be like football. You know, now people work out their differences playing football or soccer or whatever you want to call it. So that's my utopian thinking and that's what I think that's what we have to strive for, because I think to strive for maintaining borders is just too pessimistic for me. But to strive for a borderless world, as terrifying as it is for certain individuals or peoples now, that's what we should be aiming for. Because if we can do that within our country, if the borders between states… There's still tension there, but if we're not yet fighting wars now over the borders between states, maybe we won't be fighting wars over the borders between nations. That's the hope that I hang on to, born from my experience coming out of both Vietnam and the U.S.

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INTERVIEWER:

Your teaching is very nuanced. Are your students in this era where their information is coming with a fire hose— their phones and devices—is nuance possible now? Can you teach in the same way that you might have even 10 or 15 years ago?

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VIET THANH NGUYEN:
So I'm a university teacher. I teach everybody from freshmen to doctoral students. And I'm also a person who believes in certain things very passionately. And so as a teacher, the challenge for me is, well, how do I keep my integrity and keep my beliefs in my teaching while not trying to be an authoritarian and tell my students what to believe and be a propagandist to my own students? And so it's a real pedagogical and ethical challenge for me. But I'll give you one example of how I try to do this. I teach an undergraduate lecture course on the American war in Vietnam as a general education requirement, and I have to believe in nuance. I have to believe in persuasion. I have to believe in the space of the humanities that we can teach a very difficult and complicated, divisive subject to people coming from across the ideological and experiential spectrum, and that we can have conversations, that I can impart a narrative that of certain kinds of facts, but also certain kinds of interpretations, and that I can try to provoke conversation and thinking in my students and that they will be able to engage with each other, and that even if they're coming from different purposes, some want to learn out of curiosity, some want to learn about their histories, some want to learn about war because that's what they're going to do, that we can reach some common ground. And what I try to impart to the students is that war is

something that involves soldiers and men, but it also involves civilians and women and children and refugees and all of that, because I want my students understand that war, whether we agree with it or don't agree with it, whether we're going to conduct it or oppose it, we need to understand it in all of its complexity. And that's the power and beauty of teaching. And I think for me, the power and the beauty is not to arrive at a destination where the students will think exactly what I think, but to arrive at a destination where the students will be asking themselves questions that will make them be skeptical of what it is that they've learned before they came to my class. And I think that's the best thing that I can do as a professor and a teacher is to make people question. Because we shouldn't be whether we're are teachers or writers or artists, we shouldn't be thinking about making reproducing ourselves in our students or the people who are coming to our works. But we should be doing is, think about reproducing the structure of what we believe. If what we believe is, for example, for me, constant questioning, constant skepticism, constant openness, that's what I want to impart into the students, not like a concrete lesson.

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INTERVIEWER:
You talked about the power of art. I've read, it said—and please tell me if this is accurate—that your first exposure to what happened in Vietnam was through art, not through your parents' discussion, but through seeing the film *Apocalypse Now*. How old were you when you saw that? And tell me how you reacted to it.

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VIET THANH NGUYEN:

If first saw the movie *Apocalypse Now* on my parent's VCR when I was probably about 11 or 12 years old. I loved watching war movies, John Wayne, Audie Murphy, war movies. But I didn't know anything about the Vietnam War except that we came out of that, my family and I, and *Apocalypse Now* was at that point in the early 1980s, a very, very famous movie. So that's all I knew about it. And I popped it into the VCR and I watched it, and I was rooting for the American soldiers until the moment they massacred Vietnamese civilians. And then I was split in two. Was I supposed to be the American doing the killing or was I the Vietnamese being killed, or murdered, really. And I didn't really understand how to make sense out of that. The movie was very confusing. And so I just bracketed the movie and the emotion for a decade until I went to college, and then I was asked in a film class to recount a cinematic moment that was important. And the first thing that came to mind was that moment *in Apocalypse Now*, where the civilians are being murdered. And as I recounted that scene to the class, I found myself shaking in rage and anger. And that was a moment where I realized that that movie had had an enormous impact on me. And it brought on the understanding that stories and art have the power not just to save us, but that stories had the power to destroy us. Realizing that art had that capacity was really transformative for me because it helped me to understand how my entire life had been shaped by art. If we talk specifically just about Hollywood movies, and what Hollywood movies have- how they've depicted the Vietnam War, that they have totally shaped my reality as a Vietnamese refugee, as an Asian American, as a human being. And then I realized that then I had the power as a writer to try to fight back. And when I think about a movie like

Apocalypse Now, I don't condemn it, even though I think that it is, in fact, racist towards Vietnamese people. It's perfectly possible for a work of art to be great, which I think *Apocalypse Now* is, and racist or problematic in various kinds of ways. And so I think it's that complexity and that contradiction in art that's so compelling for me. And so even though I've criticized and satirized *Apocalypse Now* and I see its limitations, I also see its power. And I wanted to steal some of that power for myself because I could see that what Francis Ford Coppola was doing was depicting the monstrosity of the United States and the monstrosity of what Americans are capable of doing. And out of that, he produced great art at the expense of Vietnamese people. And so when it came time for me to write my novels, my feeling was, I'm not interested in saving Vietnamese people. I'm not interested in casting us as angels or as victims. I'm interested in seizing the same power that Coppola took. I'm interested in understanding the monstrosity and the humanity of Vietnamese people, just as he was for Americans. That was the great lesson I took away from *Apocalypse Now*, for which I will be forever grateful, even as I will continue to make fun of *Apocalypse Now* at the same time.

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INTERVIEWER:
And, of course, the difference for Americans from Vietnam era to Iraq and Afghanistan, this is something called the draft. I wonder if, as you talk about it and teach it and understand the American experience that happened beforehand, you see that because you were now with the people both going off and returning from these endless wars, very different. These are people

who in most cases, all cases really chose to be there. Not the case in Vietnam. Do you see that distinction? And have you talked to, for example, Vietnam veterans about that experience?

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VIET THANH NGUYEN:
So the war in Vietnam for the United States was traumatic internally to the country because of so much resistance against the draft and a lot of people didn't want to go for self-interested reasons. And that meshed with the general anti-war sentiment about what the United States was doing to Vietnam and the Vietnamese. And now we're at a moment where the draft doesn't exist. And arguably, this enables the United States to fight wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with relatively little domestic political opposition. And so, of course, that is a notable fact. And the way I look at it as a scholar of the war in Vietnam is that this is one of the ways in which the United States learned lessons from the war in Vietnam. The mantra is if you ignore the past, you're going to be condemned to repeat it. And in some ways, we say this about wars, as in, well, let's learn from the past, we don't have wars again. In actuality, that has happened in certain ways within the United States. But pessimistically, I think we have learned some of the wrong lessons from the war in Vietnam so that the Pentagon and the military industrial complex have learned certain ways to fight wars better. Like, let's not get the draft involved, let's not have the media report things like this. And so, in fact, we are now fighting more wars instead of not fighting wars, because of the lessons that the military and the government have learned from the war in Vietnam.

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INTERVIEWER:

Your parents left the North in 1954, and then yet again, inflection point comes in '75 with the fall of Saigon, and you're here. These inflection points, have affected you personally and your family, they're ancient history to people who were not of an age. How do you reflect on it personally and how do you help people to understand those moments in time and why they were important?

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VIET THANH NGUYEN:

I do spend a lot of time thinking about the events of history that have transformed my family's lives and mine, that my parents were born in the 1930s, which meant that their entire lives were defined by war, colonization, famine and being refugees, twice. We're always going to be shaped by historical events, right? But things are perhaps a little bit different when your entire lives are upended by historical events. And for me, what that means is I do think a lot, both about how my life has been shaped by war and the refugee experience, but also what would have happened if different decisions had been made by my parents. I do have this sense of my life having multiple possibilities and my awareness that I would be a very different person. So, for example, my adopted sister was left behind in 1975. I can see how her life turned out. I don't think I would have become a writer if I had stayed behind in 1975 because I wouldn't have had the opportunities. I would probably be very unhappy, and that sense that I've lived a very— despite the war and the refugee experience and the trauma—I've also lived a very blessed and lucky

life in a lot of ways because of how things turned out for me. It gives me a sense of humility. It also gives me a sense of anger. Like my life turned out this way, well, what would have happened if there hadn't been war and division and colonization? How would the lives of all these other people have turned out? Or what would have happened to the 3 million people who died? They would have lived. So that that is enormous motivation for me as a writer, but as a person, as a human being, as someone who thinks about war and human consequences, and about how the actions of certain individuals in charge of our military and our politics and our geopolitics, how those decisions have enormous ripples across millions of lives. And in my own little way, then with art and writing, I try to illuminate that, try to complicate that, try to force people to think about these things. Because the reality is that these historical events radically altered the lives of the Vietnamese people and my family. The reality is for many Americans, it didn't alter anything at all. Their lives went on just fine. It was different if they had to go to war, if they lost relatives or whatever, but for most Americans, life went on. And it's as if the war didn't matter. It was as if all these millions of dead didn't matter. And it's still happening today. Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan. Now I'm complicit that the lives of Afghans were totally altered. Hundreds of thousands died. My life went on, just the same. And so I have to think ethically and politically about my own existence because of what I was aware of in Vietnam.

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INTERVIEWER:
As you sit here today, what gives your life the greatest meaning?

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VIET THANH NGUYEN:

I think before I became a father, I would say that what gave my life the greatest meaning was my writing, my art, my belief that literature really matters because it did matter to me very personally that I grew up as a refugee, watching my parents struggle and suffer in their grocery store. And the way that I survived that experience was through immersing myself in stories and other people's writings and art. And that really saved my life in a spiritual sense. And so I had this deep and early conviction that art really mattered. And I said that I believed in this before I became a father, and I don't want to become sentimental because before I became a father, I was like, "I don't even want to be a father." But then I became a father, and I think I'm actually kind of a decent father, although I will let my children weigh in 30 years from now as to the accuracy of that statement. But I think that being a father has given me another sense of meaning in life as well. It's not something I want to impose on other people. No one else needs to be a parent, as far as I'm concerned. But having become a parent of two children, it is very meaningful for me and it has taught me things about myself that I didn't know I was capable of, like love. And the love has had a big impact on me as a writer and an artist as well. So I'm grateful to the transformations that fatherhood and parenting have given me and that they've given me a deeper sense of humanity, both my children's humanity, but also mine as well.

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