



THE MOUNTAINS SING

by Phan Que Mai Nguyen

Summary:

With the epic sweep of Min Jin Lee's Pachinko or Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing and the lyrical beauty of Vaddey Ratner's In the Shadow of the Banyan, The Mountains Sing tells an enveloping, multigenerational tale of the Tran family, set against the backdrop of the Viet Nam War.

Tran Dieu Lan, who was born in 1920, was forced to flee her family farm with her six children during the Land Reform as the Communist government rose in the North.

Years later in Ha Noi, her young granddaughter, Huong, comes of age as her parents and uncles head off down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to fight in a conflict that tore not just her beloved country, but her family apart.

Vivid, gripping, and steeped in the language and traditions of Viet Nam, *The Mountains Sing* brings to life the human costs of this conflict from the point of view of the Vietnamese people themselves, while showing us the true power of kindness and hope.

The Mountains Sing is celebrated Vietnamese poet Nguyen Phan Que Mai's first novel in English. (*From the publisher.*)



Author Bio:

- Birth—1973
- Where—Ninh Bình Province, North Vietnam
- Raised—Bac Lieu Province, South Vietnam
- Education—B.A., from Australia; M.F.A., Lancaster University (UK)
- Awards—(see below)
- Currently—lives in Jakarta, Indonesia

Nguyen Phan Que Mai (*gwen-fawn-kway-my*; first name, *Que Mai*) was born in a small village of war torn Northern Vietnam and grew up witnessing the war's devastation and its aftermath. When she was six years old, her family moved to the Mekong Delta in the southern part of Vietnam.

She worked as a street seller and rice farmer before winning a scholarship to attend a university in Australia. Returning to her home country, she worked for various organizations, including the United Nations, to promote Viet Nam's sustainable development. She has also worked extensively with veterans and war victims.

Nguyen also earned her M.F.A. from Lancaster University in the U.K. Her eight books of poetry, fiction and nonfiction, originally published in Vietnamese, have been translated and published in more than ten countries. Her work has also appeared in the W.W. Norton & Company's anthology, *Inheriting the War: Poetry and Prose by Descendants of Vietnam Veterans and Refugees* (2017).

Awards and honors

2007 - Story about My Life (youth newspaper) Award: writing competition

2010 - Vietnamese Writers Association: advancement of Vietnamese literature overseas

2010 - Hanoi Writers Association: Poetry of the Year Award

2010 - Vietnam Writers Association, Literature Newspaper, and Hanoi Television: poetry

2010 - Vietnam Writers Association, Literature Newspaper. and Hanoi Television: translation

Married to a European diplomat, Nguyen is currently living in Jakarta with her two teenage children.

(Adapted from online sources, including the [author's website](#).)

Book Reviews:

A luminous, complex family narrative.... *The Mountains Sing* affirms the individual's right to think, read, and act according to a code of intuitive civility, borne out of Vietnam's fertile and compassionate cultural heritage.

NPR

The Mountains Sing is a multi-generational epic about a family torn apart by war and the efforts of its various members to survive. It is also the missing narrative of the American War in Vietnam.... Nguyen's poetic descriptions and deep affection for her characters allow the reader to feel for the Tran family's many vicissitudes.

Minneapolis Star-Tribune

An historical novel that portrays Vietnamese strength in the face of adversity.... I came away at the end of the book with a new appreciation for the courage and resourcefulness of the Vietnamese.

Washington Independent Review of Books

(*Starred review*) [L]yrical, sweeping debut novel chronicles the Tran family through a century of war and renewal.... Nguyen brilliantly explores... what a writer shares with the world and what remains between family. [A] brilliant, unsparing love letter to Vietnam....

Publishers Weekly

(*Starred review*) An engrossing story of family, adversity, war, loss, and triumph.... Recalling Min Jin Lee and Lisa See, Nguyen displays a lush and captivating storyteller's gift as she effortlessly transports readers to another world, leaving them wishing for more.

Library Journal

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

Booklist

(*Starred review*) A sweeping tale of one family's shifting fortunes in Vietnam across half a century.... For all the loss Nguyen depicts, though, her story is invitingly and gracefully told.... A richly imagined story of severed bonds amid conflict.

Kirkus Reviews

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. There are many major historical events featured in the novel. How much did you know about these events before you read *The Mountains Sing*? Did the story show you a new side to any events you were already familiar with?
2. Many of the characters in *The Mountains Sing* experience terrible things, and some of them must make difficult choices. Each of them handles their experiences differently. Te Son ca helps Huong on her journey. What other objects, memories, people, or conversations help each character to endure and recover?
3. How does Grandma Dieu Lan help her children after their return? What might her relationships with her children reveal about family relationships in Viet Nam?
4. War stories are often told from a male perspective. In *The Mountains Sing*, Huong and Grandma Dieu Lan take turns narrating their stories. How might the novel differ if it had male narrators? Why do you think the author chose to have women and girls tell the story instead?
5. Which character did you feel the most sympathetic toward? Te least? Is that different from which character you like the most and least, and if so, why?
6. "I was determined to sing on. I learned then that as long as I have my voice, I am still alive," says Grandma Dieu Lan. Give examples of music and poetry that are represented in the novel. How important do you think music and poetry are in the Vietnamese culture? How important are they in your own culture?

7. In addition to descriptions of war and pain, *The Mountains Sing* features many descriptions of gorgeous landscapes, interesting city sights, and delicious foods. Were there any locations that you would like to visit or have visited? Any foods you would like to try or have tried?

8. According to Huong, proverbs are the essence of Vietnamese wisdom, passed orally from one generation to the next, even before the written Vietnamese language existed. Two examples are Trongcai rui co cai may (Good luck hides inside bad luck) and Ac gia ac bao (Cruelty dispensed, cruelty returned). Do these proverbs ring true for you? Were there other proverbs that resonated with you as particularly true or meaningful?

9. In *The Mountains Sing*, Vietnamese names and words appear with their full diacritical marks. For Vietnamese speakers, these marks are necessary to interpret meaning: for example, the words ma, mả, má, mà, mẹ, and mã all have separate meanings (ghost, grave, mother, but, young rice plant, and horse, respectively). Nonetheless, it is unusual for an American novel to include the marks. Did their inclusion affect your reading experience? How?

10. Huong thinks that if people are willing to learn about other cultures, there will be no war on earth. Do you think Huong feels differently about America and American people because of her reading? What books have made your world bigger?

11. Grandma says, "If our stories survive, we will not die, even when our bodies are no longer here on this earth." *The Mountains Sing* is inspired by some of the experiences of the author's family. What stories from your own family can be written into a novel? Do you know of any fictional stories that remind you of your own family story?

12. Had you previously read other books from or about Viet Nam? How is the Viet Nam portrayed in *The Mountains Sing* similar to or different from the Viet Nam you already knew?

(Questions issued by the publisher.)

Source: <https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/fiction/11637-mountains-sing-nguyen>