

The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen is a war novel, a spy novel

The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen is a war novel, a spy novel—but don't call it an immigrant novel.

By [SCU](#)

[The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen review – a bold, artful debut](#)



The book won the Pulitzer, and in 2017 Nguyen was awarded a MacArthur “genius” grant and published a collection of stories, *The Refugees*. The distinction between immigrant and refugee was a central part of Nguyen’s talk and reading on

campus last fall.

"We hated immigrants before, some of us hate immigrants now, but the point is that immigrants are part of the American mythology," Nguyen said. "They're part of the American dream. Immigrants validate the United States, whether or not we want them to come here at all. Refugees are completely different. Refugees are the unwashed, they are the unwanted, they come bringing with them the stigma of all kinds of fears of contamination, the idea that they come from broken states and broken countries."

Nguyen himself is a refugee. He was born in the central highlands of Vietnam, and after the fall of Saigon in 1975, his family fled to the United States. He grew up in San Jose and witnessed his vibrant Vietnamese community "still suffering traumatically from what had happened to them," as he put it. "I grew up hearing all these stories about what the Vietnamese people had gone through. And, at the same time, I was growing up as an American. And I was getting a very different version of this war from American culture."

Case in point: the jarring difference between the treatment that a film like *Apocalypse Now* dealt Vietnamese people, versus how Vietnamese people saw themselves. With *The Sympathizer*, Nguyen set out to try to undo a sense of victimization.

His novel is a tale of America as well as Vietnam. "We were lucky as refugees to come to this country," he said. "We were not special. And people who were refugees need to stand up for people who are refugees today. Which is why I always claim I'm still a refugee."

His willingness to tackle difficult subjects has led to him being called a "voice for the voiceless"—a moniker with which he takes umbrage. "The problem, of course, is not that the Vietnamese people are voiceless," he said. "It's that no one

wants to hear them ... Any type of minority—we're up against systems and structures who don't want to hear from us, who don't actually want to give voices to the voiceless. They just want representatives to make it easier for us to be heard. That's the role I resist."

Nguyen spoke to a packed house at the de Saisset Museum on October 19. His visit was part of the Reading Forward series, co-sponsored by the *Santa Clara Review*, the Creative Writing Program, and the Department of English. The series brings writers to campus to participate in classes as well as meet with students and faculty in small groups to discuss writing and publishing. On that front: Nguyen is currently working on a sequel to *The Sympathizer* called *The Committed*.