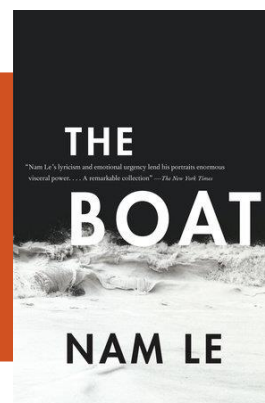




The Boat

Nam Le



Author Background

Nam Le came to Australia from Vietnam with his parents, when he was less than a year old, as a boat refugee. He went to Melbourne Grammar School and the University of Melbourne, from where he graduated with a BA (Hons) and LLB (Hons). His Arts thesis supervisor was the Australian poet Chris Wallace-Crabbe. He worked as a corporate lawyer and was admitted to the Supreme Court of Victoria in 2003/2004.

However, he decided to turn to writing, and in 2004 attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the United States of America where he completed a Masters in Creative Writing. He became fiction editor at the Harvard Review. His first short story was published in Zoetrope in 2006. Nam Le also held fellowships at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown in 2006, and at the Phillips Exeter Academy, in 2007. He returned to Australia in 2008 but is moving to Great Britain to take up a writing fellowship at the University of East Anglia.

When asked about his source of inspiration, Nam Le said in 2008 that "I'd say I'm most inspired by my parents for the choices and sacrifices they've made. It still boggles me".

Book Summary

A collection of short stories that take us from the slums of Colombia to the streets of Tehran; from New York City to Iowa City; from a tiny fishing village in Australia to a foundering vessel in the South China Sea, in a masterly display of literary virtuosity and feeling.

In the magnificent opening story, "Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice," a young writer is urged by his friends to mine his father's experiences in Vietnam--and what seems at first a satire of turning one's life into literary commerce becomes a transcendent exploration of homeland, and the ties between father and son. "Cartagena" provides a visceral glimpse of life in Colombia as it enters the mind of a fourteen-year-old hit man facing the ultimate test. In "Meeting Elise," an aging New York painter mourns his body's decline as he prepares to meet his daughter on the eve of her Carnegie Hall debut. And with graceful symmetry, the final, title story returns to Vietnam, to a fishing trawler crowded with refugees, where a young woman's bond with a mother and her small son forces both women to a shattering decision.

Brilliant, daring, and demonstrating a jaw-dropping versatility of voice and point of view, "The Boat" is an extraordinary work of fiction that takes us to the heart of what it means to be human, and announces a writer of astonishing gifts.

Discussion Questions

❖ “Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice”.

When his father arrives, the narrator is dreaming about a poem he is writing. His father “had a habit of speaking in Vietnamese proverbs”. Why is the juxtaposition of the father’s use of proverbs and the son’s efforts to create new words significant in the story? How would you describe the relationship between father and son?

❖ “Cartagena”

After his friends seek out and attack “the target” at the opening of the story, Ron realises that “this business was personal”. He later learns why his friends were taking their revenge on this man. Discuss the plotting of the story and why its careful unfolding of surprises is effective. What details of setting, speech or character contribute to the impact of the story?

❖ “Meeting Elise”

What does Henry hope to gain by seeing his daughter, and why does Elise refuse to see her father finally? What is the connection, for Henry, between his lover Olivia and Elise?

❖ “Halflead Bay”

What is significant about the scene in which the boy hooks a seagull while fishing and his mother has to kill the bird for him? How does this scene relate to the fight with Dory when his father and brother come to help him out? What is left unresolved or is unclear in this story?

❖ “Hiroshima”

How much time passes in the story? How is time slowed down as the bomb makes its way to Mayako? How do her memories work to enlarge the picture of her life, which is about to be lost? How effective is Nam Le’s choice to have the story’s final moment recall the flash of a photograph taken by Mayako’s father earlier?

❖ “Tehran Calling”

Sarah feels that Paul was “the aberration of her life: the relief from her lifelong suspicion that she was, at heart, a hollow person, who clung to hollow things” Is there evidence for this in the story? How do you interpret the ending of the story, and the paragraph beginning with the words “You could never know”?

❖ “The Boat”

Why have Mai’s parents sent her away from home? What do you understand about the political situation, and about what Mai’s father has experienced? What is the nature of the bond that develops between Mai and the little boy Truong? How is it connected to the story of Mai and her father?

❖ General Questions

Given that Nam Le says that he has never been to many of the places depicted in these stories, discuss the imaginative work involved in creating this array of settings and characters. What does Nam Le do to create a convincing sense of the subjectivity of his characters?

Nam Le has said of **The Boat**, “I find it hard to figure out whether this book as a whole is an exercise in hope or in despair. I think all of us are more alone than we would like to think of ourselves as being”. Discuss the effect of the collection as a whole; what conclusions do you reach about the vision of life in these stories?

References

- ❖ <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/99833/the-boat-by-nam-le/>
- ❖ <http://www.namleonline.com/index.html>