

Dust Child, by Nguyen Phan Que Mai

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

Vietnamese writer Nguyen Phan Que Mai's powerful new book *Dust Child* centers on the tragic legacy of the Vietnam War. The novel's plot, spanning decades, features three separate storylines which converge in tender and unexpected ways.

Dust Child began in 2016 at the American Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Sai Gon. Phong, a man of mixed race who had been abandoned as a baby in an orphanage in 1972, is applying for a visa as part of the Amerasian Homecoming Act. With his dark skin and wavy hair, Phong is certain that he is the son of a Black American soldier. All his life he "had been called the dust of life, bastard, Black American imperialist, child of the enemy." Proving his American parentage, however, would be challenging.

At the same time, Dan Ashland, a Vietnam War veteran now in his 60s, is also in Ho Chi Minh City, ostensibly for a vacation with his wife Linda. When he had enlisted in the Army in 1969, Dan, "like many nineteen-year-olds, thought he was invincible. It had taken about a month in Vietnam to lose that illusion. The knowledge of death had robbed him of his youth." Now suffering from PTSD, Dan hopes the return trip will heal the pain of the War and assuage his guilt for leaving Kim, his pregnant Vietnamese girlfriend.

The novel's narrative then reverts to 1969. Two teenage sisters, Trang and Quynh, are toiling in their family's rice fields in a remote Vietnamese village. Their disabled father had fought for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) alongside American troops. The sisters, wanting to help their struggling parents, hear from their friend Han about how to make money in bustling Sai Gon. Han tells them the job is simply drinking Sai Gon Tea at a bar and chatting with American soldiers.

Soon after Trang and Quynh arrive at the Hollywood Bar in Sai Gon, they realize that the work would entail more than drinking tea with GIs. Desperate to send money home to their parents, the sisters are forced into a life they never had imagined. Sitting at the bar one afternoon, Trang "understood that while these men had come to Vietnam without their families, they were somehow carrying their parents, friends, and siblings on their backs—just like she was carrying hers."

As *Dust Child* reaches its poignant conclusion, the author deftly ties up the storylines of Phong, Dan, and the two sisters. Memorable and moving, *Dust Child* is highly recommended.

(Note: *Dust Child* is part of Heritage Hills Library and Somers Library collections. For a list of new books at the Heritage Hills Library, please see page 12.)