

# Amnesty International Group 22 Pasadena/Caltech News

Volume XXIV Number 9, September 2016

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Thursday, September 22, 7:30 PM.** Monthly Meeting. We meet at the Caltech Y, Tyson House, 505 S. Wilson Ave., Pasadena. (This is just south of the corner with San Pasqual. Signs will be posted.) We will be planning our activities for the coming months. Please join us! Refreshments provided.

**Tuesday, October 11, 7:30 PM.** Letter writing meeting at Caltech Athenaeum, corner of Hill and California in Pasadena. This informal gathering is a great way for newcomers to get acquainted with Amnesty.

**Sunday, October 16, 6:30 PM.** Rights Readers Human Rights Book Discussion Group. This month we read **"The Sympathizer" by Viet Thanh Nguyen.**

## COORDINATOR'S CORNER

Hi everyone

Happy Fall -- my favorite season.

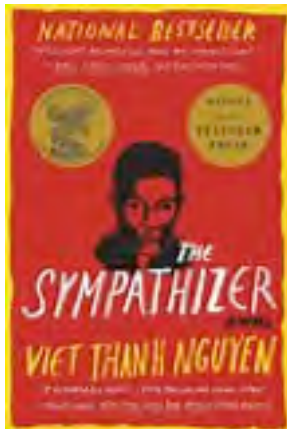
The Western Regional Conference will be held in LA again this year October 28-30.

Here's the link for early bird registration- rates increase after October 2<sup>nd</sup>.

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/events/regional-conferences/western>

See you all there!

Con Cariño, Kathy



**Next Rights Readers meeting:**

**Sunday, October 18  
6:30 PM**

**Vroman's Bookstore  
(upstairs)  
695 E. Colorado Blvd  
Pasadena**

***The Sympathizer*  
by  
Viet Thanh Nguyen**

## REVIEW

The New York Times Sunday Book Review

By Philip Caputo APRIL 2, 2015

**"The Sympathizer" by Viet Thanh Nguyen**

The more powerful a country is, the more disposed its people will be to see it as the lead actor in the sometimes farcical, often tragic pageant of history. So it is that we, citizens of a superpower, have viewed the Vietnam War as a solely American drama in which the febrile land of tigers and elephants was mere backdrop and the Vietnamese mere extras.

That outlook is reflected in the literature — and Vietnam was a very literary war, producing an immense library of fiction and nonfiction. Among all those volumes, you'll find only a handful (Robert Olen Butler's "A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain" comes to mind) with Vietnamese characters speaking in their own voices.

Hollywood has been still more Americentric. In films like "Apocalypse Now" and "Platoon," the Vietnamese (often other Asians portraying Vietnamese) are never more than walk-ons whose principal roles seem to be to die or wail in the ashes of incinerated villages.

Which brings me to Viet Thanh Nguyen's remarkable debut novel, "The Sympathizer." Nguyen, born in Vietnam but raised in the United States, brings a distinct perspective to the war and its aftermath. His book fills a void in the literature, giving voice to the previously voiceless while it compels the rest of us to look at the events of 40 years ago in a new light.

But this tragicomic novel reaches beyond its historical context to illuminate more universal themes: the eternal misconceptions and misunderstandings between East and West, and the moral dilemma faced by people forced to choose not between right and wrong, but right and right. The nameless protagonist-narrator, a memorable character despite his anonymity, is an Americanized Vietnamese with a divided heart and mind. Nguyen's skill in portraying this sort of ambivalent personality compares favorably with masters like Conrad, Greene and le Carré.

Duality is literally in the protagonist's blood, for he is a half-caste, the illegitimate son of a teenage Vietnamese mother (whom he loves) and a French Catholic priest (whom he hates). Widening the split in his nature, he was

educated in the United States, where he learned to speak English without an accent and developed another love-hate relationship, this one with the country that he feels has coined too many “super” terms (supermarkets, superhighways, the Super Bowl, and so on) “from the federal bank of its narcissism.”

The narrator’s acrobatic ability to balance between two worlds is his strength and weakness, as he makes clear in his opening lines: “I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds, . . . able to see any issue from both sides. Sometimes I flatter myself that this is a talent,” he continues, but “I wonder if what I have should even be called talent. After all, a talent is something you use, not something that uses you. The talent you cannot not use, the talent that possesses you — that is a hazard.” And a hazard it proves to be.

The protagonist’s narrative, which takes the form of a confession written to a mystery man known as “the commandant,” begins in the final days of the war, as Communist forces close in on Saigon. The narrator is aide-de-camp to “the general” (one of several characters who, like the narrator, is never identified by name), the chief of South Vietnam’s National Police and, with it, of Special Branch, the secret police.

But the narrator is also a mole, a Communist undercover agent assigned to keep tabs on the general and Special Branch’s activities. His closest friend is Bon, an assassin with the C.I.A.’s Phoenix program, “a genuine patriot” who volunteered to fight after Communists murdered his father for the crime of being a village chief. The narrator’s North Vietnamese handler, Man, is also an old chum. Indeed, the narrator, Bon and Man were high school classmates, who in their youth melodramatically swore allegiance to one another by becoming blood brothers. This complex relationship, with the narrator in the tenuous middle, riven by conflicting loyalties, is a recipe for tragic betrayals, and those come, one after the other.

Working through a C.I.A. spook named Claude, the narrator dispenses liberal bribes to engineer an air evacuation to the United States for the general, the general’s wife and their huge extended family. Bon is also to be lifted out with his wife and child. The narrator wants to stay and take his place in a reunified Vietnam, but Man, convinced that the general and his cohort will plot a counterrevolution from abroad, gives him a new mission that is an extension of his old

one: “Your general isn’t the only one planning to keep on fighting,” he explains. “The war’s been going on too long for them to simply stop. We need someone to keep an eye on them.”

Nguyen presents a gripping picture of the fall of Saigon, its confusion, chaos and terror, as the narrator flees with the others under a storm of shellfire from his Viet Cong and North Vietnamese comrades. Bon’s wife and child are killed before their plane takes off, giving him two more deaths to avenge.

This rich narrative stew is assembled in the novel’s first 50 pages, then set on a low simmer. From that brief, intense beginning we proceed to a picaresque account of the narrator’s experiences as a refugee-cum-spy in Los Angeles. He lands a clerical job with his former professor, has an affair with an older Japanese-American woman and sends messages to Man (written in invisible ink) via an intermediary in Paris. Here the novel becomes both thriller and social satire. If you like your humor written in charcoal, this is the funniest part of the book, though it’s occasionally spoiled by zingers that belong on “The Daily Show” more than they do in a serious novel.

The narrator’s espionage activities lead him to make a foray into the movie business. He is hired by a director, “the auteur” (who bears a resemblance to Francis Ford Coppola), to round up Vietnamese in a Philippine refugee camp to work as extras in his film (which bears a resemblance to “Apocalypse Now”). Nguyen adroitly handles the shifting tones of these episodes, now hilarious, now sad, as the narrator tries to do what Nguyen has done: de-Americanize the portrayal of the war. But, unlike Nguyen, he fails.

Thereafter, the book’s mood darkens. The narrator falls into a web of deceit and treachery spun by his dual role and the schisms in his soul. Man’s suspicions prove accurate: The general and some other die-hards, guilt-ridden for not fighting to the death, bored with their mediocre lives in the States (the general has become owner of a liquor store), plot a counter-revolutionary invasion with the help of a right-wing congressman.

The narrator assists in the planning, while sending reports to Man. However, to avoid having his cover blown, he is compelled to take part in two assassinations. One victim is an ex-Special Branch officer, “the crapulent major,” the other is a Vietnamese journalist at a

California newspaper. The descriptions of the murders are tense, psychologically complex, riveting. The narrator's conscience becomes as torn as the rest of him. "Remorse over the crapulent major's death was ringing me up a few times a day, tenacious as a debt collector," he thinks.

(A parenthetical quibble. Good as it is, "The Sympathizer" is sometimes marred by overwriting. Lines like this — "The waiters arrived at that moment with the solemnity of Egyptian servants ready to be buried alive with their pharaoh, platters with the main courses propped on their shoulders" — appear a bit too often.)

The general eventually assembles a ragtag army of former South Vietnamese soldiers, armed and funded by the Americans. Man, kept abreast of the scheme, orders the narrator to remain in the States even as this army heads back to Asia, but he is once again rent by divided loyalties. He feels he must go to save Bon, his blood brother, from dying in what he's sure will be a suicide mission. He finds himself caught in his familiar dilemma, "with no idea how I would manage to betray Bon and save him at the same time."

The blood of friendship is thicker than the water of ideology. The narrator joins the general's army. What happens to it is predictable; what happens to the narrator and Bon is anything but. I don't want to give anything away, except to say that in its final chapters, "The Sympathizer" becomes an absurdist tour de force that might have been written by a Kafka or Genet.

As that narrative unfolds, the protagonist makes several startling discoveries, among which is the identity of the commandant's own boss, the commissar. Under interrogation, the narrator goes temporarily insane; but in his madness he achieves a new mental clarity. He sees that the revolution for which he's sacrificed so much has betrayed him and everyone who fought for it — as revolutions are prone to do.

Even the people who call the shots must admit that the fruits of victory are rotten, and the narrator in turn must recognize "this joke, about how a revolution fought for independence and freedom could make those things worth less than nothing.

But that revelation produces an insight that saves him from complete despair: "Despite it all — yes, despite everything, in the face of nothing," he writes at the end of the "confession" that is this book, "we still consider

ourselves revolutionary. We remain that most hopeful of creatures, a revolutionary in search of a revolution, although we will not dispute being called a dreamer doped by an illusion. . . . We cannot be alone! Thousands more must be staring into darkness like us, gripped by scandalous thoughts, extravagant hopes and forbidden plots. We lie in wait for the right moment and the just cause, which, at this moment, is simply wanting to live."

(Philip Caputo is the author of "A Rumor of War" and 14 other books. He is currently working on a novel set in Mexico.)

## AUTHOR BIO



Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer* is a New York Times best seller and won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Other honors include the Edgar Award for Best First Novel from the Mystery Writers of America, the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction

from the American Library Association, the First Novel Prize from the Center for Fiction, a Gold Medal in First Fiction from the California Book Awards, and the Asian/Pacific American Literature Award from the Asian/Pacific American Librarian Association. His other books are *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (long listed for the National Book Award in nonfiction) and *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*. He is the Aerol Arnold Chair of English, and an associate professor of American Studies and Ethnicity, at the University of Southern California. His next book is a short story collection, *The Refugees*, forthcoming in February 2016 from Grove Press.

## DEATH PENALTY NEWS

By Stevi Carroll

### Justice That Works - YES On 62

We have buttons! We have brochures! We have signs!

I went to a meeting presented by folks working for YES On 62. The group included priests;

nuns; public defenders; people from various abolitionist groups, including the NAACP; Stephen Rohde, Chair, Board of Directors for Death Penalty Focus; Mike Farrell (of M\*A\*S\*H fame), who's taken time off from Death Penalty Focus to work on YES On 62; and other interested SoCal people.

We now have access to information and our task will be to see how we can pitch the message. I've emailed Gary Moody, the president of our local NAACP branch, to see if he'd like to do something together. We'll consider other possibilities at our monthly meeting.

I continue to think one of the best things we can do is to contribute to the cause. Prop 66 (to speed up the execution process) has money and will start (or has started) flooding the airwaves. Vote by mail begins October 10th, so the YES On 62 message needs to get out, and as we know, commercial time costs a bundle. To donate, go to <https://secure.actblue.com/contribute/page/jt-w-home>

Maybe just maybe this will be the year the death penalty ends in California.



## Bryan Stevenson

Our September book for Rights Readers is *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. If you have not had a chance to read it, please do, and as you read the exonerations below, think of the work the Equal Justice Initiative does. Also, if you have not yet seen Bryan Stevenson's TED talk, "We need to talk about an injustice", please go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2tOp7OxyQ8>

## Exonerations

### Eugene Johnson, Derrick Wheatt, Laurese Glover

State: OH - Date of Exoneration: 8/15/2016  
In 1996, Eugene Johnson, along with Derrick Wheatt and Laurese Glover were convicted of murder in Cleveland, Ohio and was sentenced to 18 years to life in prison. They were exonerated in 2016 after the Ohio Innocence Project found long-concealed police reports

pointing to other suspects and the only eyewitness recanted her testimony.

### Neal Robbins

State: TX - Date of Exoneration: 8/18/2016  
In 1999, Neal Robbins was convicted of suffocating his girlfriend's 17-month old daughter and sentenced to life in prison in Montgomery County, Texas. He was exonerated in 2016 after the medical examiner recanted and said the death could have been the result of aggressive resuscitation attempts.

### Anthony Wright

State: PA - Date of Exoneration: 8/23/2016  
In 1993, Anthony Wright was convicted of rape and murder in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and was sentenced to life in prison without parole. After DNA tests identified the rapist, Wright was acquitted at a retrial in 2016.

### Darryle Howard

State: NC D- ate of Exoneration: 9/2/2016

In 1995, Darryl Howard was sentenced to 80 years in prison for arson and the murders of a woman and her 13-year-old daughter in Durham, North Carolina. He was exonerated in 2016 after the disclosure of a police report pointing to other suspects that had been concealed by the prosecution and DNA tests that linked a career criminal to the crime.

### **Johnny Small**

State: NC - Date of Exoneration: 9/7/2016  
In 1989, Johnny Small was sentenced to life in prison for a murder in Wilmington, North Carolina when he was 15. He was exonerated in 2016 after the key witness admitted he falsely implicated Small and police reports contradicting other witnesses were revealed for the first time.

### **Wayne Martin**

State: NY - Date of Exoneration: 9/7/2016  
In 2010, Wayne Martin was convicted of fatally shooting two men and wounding a third in Brooklyn, New York. He was exonerated in 2016 because police reports pointing to other suspects had been concealed by the prosecution.

### **Richard Raugust**

State: MT - Date of Exoneration: 9/7/2016  
In 1998, Richard Raugust was sentenced to life in prison for murdering his best friend in Trout Creek, Montana. He was exonerated in 2016 because the real killer had confessed repeatedly to friends and acquaintances and a police officer provided previously undisclosed testimony supporting Raugust's alibi.

source:

<https://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/>

### **Stays of Execution**

July

24	Jeffery Wood	TX
31	Rolando Ruiz	TX

September

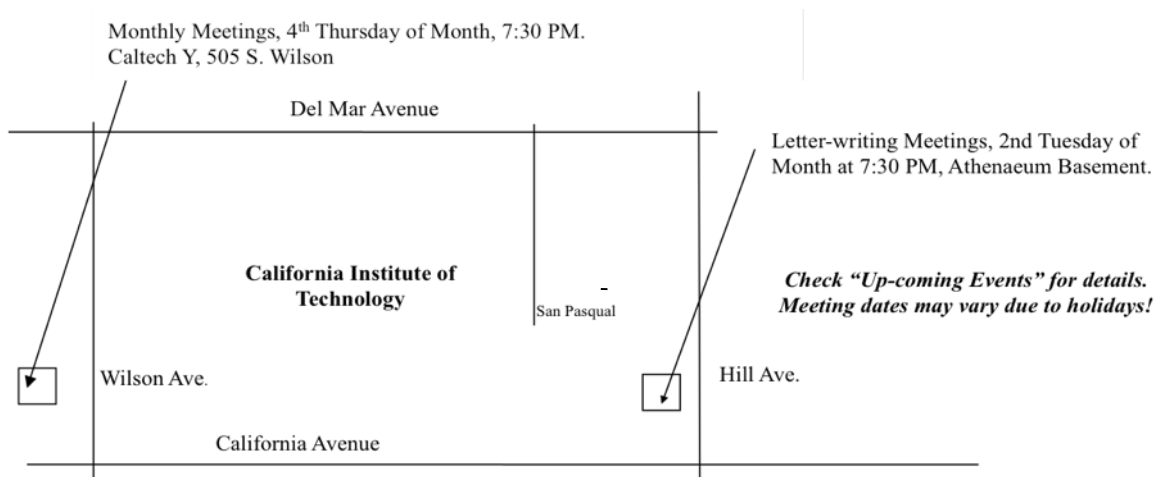
14	Robert Mitchell Jennings	TX
19	Albert Johnson	OK
21	Kareem Jackson	OH

### **Executions**

HOORAY! Still no executions in the USA since July 15, 2016. Texas has gone five months without executing a human being. This is the longest stretch between executions in that state since 2008 when the Supremes were considering the constitutionality of lethal injection.

#### **Group 22 September Letter Count**

UA for POC	4
Other UAs	13
Total	17
To add your letters to the total contact <a href="mailto:aigp22@caltech.edu">aigp22@caltech.edu</a>	



From the 210 exit on Lake Avenue, head south, turn left on Del Mar  
 From the 110 continue on Arroyo Parkway north, turn right on California  
 Street parking is generally available.

Amnesty International Group 22  
 The Caltech Y  
 Mail Code C1-128  
 Pasadena, CA 91125  
[www.its.caltech.edu/~aigp22/](http://www.its.caltech.edu/~aigp22/)  
<http://rightsreaders.blogspot.com>



Amnesty International's mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination, within the context of its work to promote all human rights.