

NOVEL CLUB

Minutes January 7, 2020

The Novel Club met January 7, 2020 at the beautiful Cleveland Heights arts and crafts home of Joyce Kessler. We had a lively chit chat over snacks and drinks, then the meeting was convened by Louise Mooney.

Guests were introduced. We welcomed Rebecca and Irad Carmi, and Leigh Haas. Joe Peter was in attendance. His wife Karen was not there that night, but their application has been approved and they were announced as members.

Treasurer's report came next; we have \$1600 in bank, collected all dues but two. Those members have thus far remained nameless publicly but they know who they are

A motion was proposed by Jay Siegel that meetings begin at 7:15. We'll try for 2 months. Motion seconded by Tricia Smith. Motion passed unanimously.

Program committee- provide book suggestions to Catherine. Will meet after February.: supply paragraph and reason for suggestion.

Our book of the evening was *the Sympathizer*, by Viet Thanh Nguyen, with the biography by Victoria Ware.

The author came in 1974 came with parents as refugee from Vietnam in evacuation. Separation left him feeling alone and abandoned. Nguyen attended catholic school. Went to UCLA and graduated from Berkeley. This is his debut novel. He won the Pulitzer prize, then got Guggenheim fellowship. Most recently wrote children's book with his son.

He cites Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison as influences and feels one of his purposes is to communicate experiences of vietnamese during the war. He has stated that America is itself based on genocide, but we feel like we are above that and do not want to discuss it. He feels time is ripe for social change.

The critical paper followed, from Rob Ware

Rob began by asking what it meant to believe in nothing. That is a question explored in the book. He mentioned that the story is told in first person, and he gave a brief synopsis of the plot, then turned to themes. For instance, the theme of duality exists throughout the book, exemplified by the main characters role as spy. Characters have conflicting demands and commitments, and the author weaves conflicts throughout. Man becomes his handler, Ban-- he is between both of them. Works on the surface for one side, but on the other side, supports the other. The biggest duality, though, is mixed heritage. The author refers to this mixed heritage with sardonic humor, although Americans are depicted with distaste. They are casually racist and exploitative in relationships.

As a reminder: the papers are posted on the website, so please see the website for more detail.

The membership had quite a bit to say on this book, so we began with prepared questions:

1. The first question concerned the South Vietnamese perspective. Did this provide new insights? It was pointed out by the first speaker that she and many others in the club lived in the era. It took a long time for people to start writing about their experience. Returning soldiers were treated like traitors and took a long time for writers to start writing about it. Tim O'Brien started it. This is a new take, a perspective we haven't heard. It was also pointed out that this perspective is that of the refugee more than specifically of Vietnamese, that it was as much about being a racially distinct immigrant. The book starts when war ending, so we learn about the people. But who were North Vietnamese? The North Vietnamese were devastated, reduced to scrapping.
2. The next question was about the narrator's personality- the first comment was that he was obviously a positive identity, and this drove the narrative. It was also noted that the book describes in awful terms what happens in war. He remarked on the Spanish civil war, in which friends and family people turned against each other. Several people agreed that the book allowed us to be able to see issues from both sides, and that two minds are confused in this book. Discussion ensued about living by two minds and the contradiction within the author's mind, and how he saw the US. As in many aspects of his thinking, he sees two sides. This was followed by a broader discussion of the war, how Johnson and Nixon escalated the war, and that while communism was dangerous and needed to be stopped, people were getting rich off the war.
3. The third question was about the author's perspective - It was said that the main character was the ultimate outsider, and people will abuse anybody they view as other; The author experienced racism due to his half breed status. Nobody got a "clean bill" in this book. Everybody, from all walks of life, behaved badly. It was generally agreed that the book is as much about racism as about anything else. All white people in the book hate brown people. It was mentioned that there was lots of hypocrisy throughout the book-US claimed they were in war to keep Americans free when really they wanted an ally in the country etc. A broader conversation about racism followed. Many seemed to agree that society is evolving on this issue and at least we are able to recognize it.
4. Next came a conversation about the author's perspective as refugee. Was his perspective different? Some felt that the distinction between immigrant and refugee is not important, that it's a state of mind and not a clear difference. Others felt strongly that it is important to note that refugees have no choice, while immigrants do. Author describes the disorientation of being refugee and uses the word intentionally.
5. Final wrap up was general observation about the book. Many insights were offered. It was noted that the narrator is willing to share conflict without resolution and this made it interesting. Others felt the ending was contrived and several parts of the book did not make sense. The author, it was stated, was a nihilist, and felt that political ideologies are not worthwhile.

People had plenty more to say, but the formal meeting adjourned at 10:04 and we enjoyed a few extra snacks and beverages, and got to meet the patient dogs who had been waiting out of sight during the meeting.