

The Great
Michigan Read

2009-10
READER'S GUIDE

Stealing
BUDDHA'S
Dinner





**The GREAT
Michigan
READ**

WELCOME !

What is The Great Michigan Read?

The Great Michigan Read is a book club for the entire state. With a statewide focus on a single book—*Stealing Buddha's Dinner* by Bich Minh Nguyen—it encourages Michiganders to learn more about their state, their history, and their society.

Why Stealing Buddha's Dinner?

Stealing Buddha's Dinner is a memoir that chronicles Bich Minh Nguyen's migration from Vietnam in 1975 and her coming of age in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in the 1980s. Along the way, she struggles to construct her own cultural identity from a menagerie of uniquely American influences. The book was selected by a group of nearly 50 librarians, teachers, students, professors, authors, and others from all corners of the state.

How can I participate?

Pick up a copy of *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* and supporting materials at Meijer, your local library, or your favorite bookseller. Read and share the book, talk about it with your friends, and participate in *free* Great Michigan Read events.

The author will tour Michigan in October 2009. To learn about this and other *free* programs in your area, visit www.michiganhumanities.org—or join The Great Michigan Read community on Facebook.

Register your library, school, book club, company, or other group and receive additional copies of reader's guides, teacher's guides, bookmarks, and posters at *no cost*. Learn about *free* program opportunities or consult with Council staff to create a custom program (free programs only for eligible nonprofit organizations). Visit www.michiganhumanities.org for details, or call (517) 372-7770.

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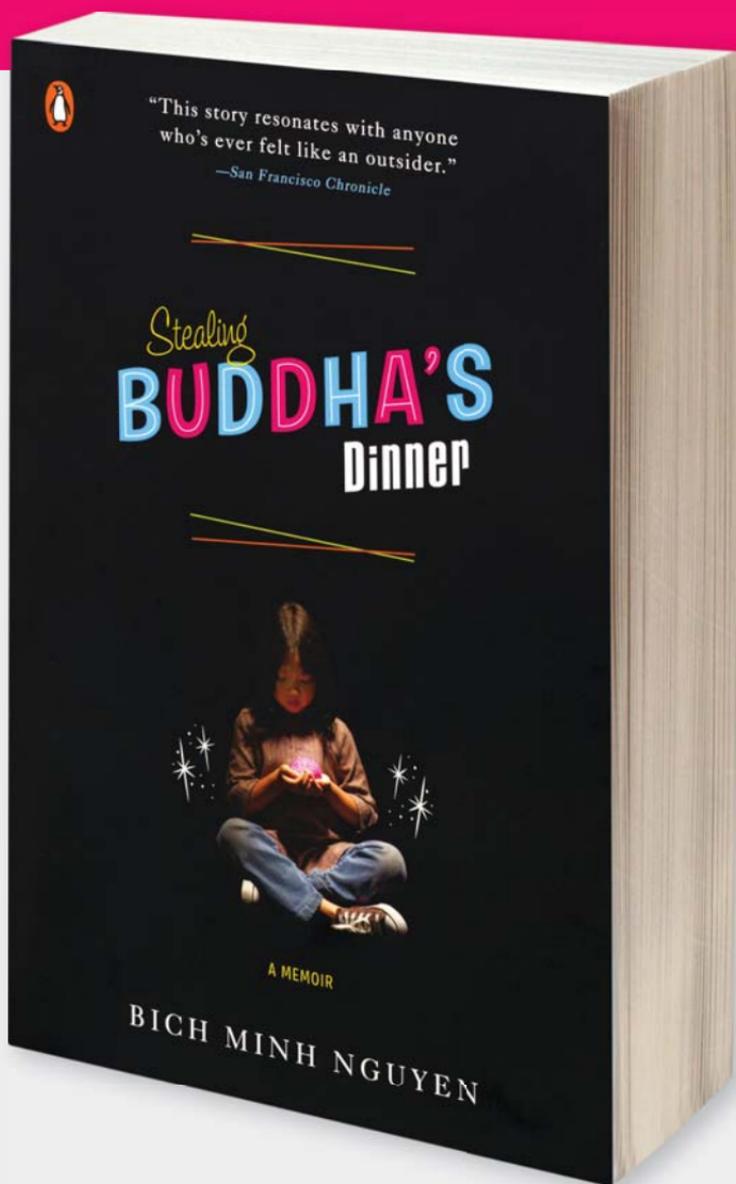
Stealing Buddha's Dinner

IT'S APRIL 29, 1975, IN SAIGON. North Vietnamese forces have effectively surrounded the city. The United States, having formally ended its military campaign two years earlier, is evacuating its remaining military and civilian personnel. Thousands, fearing North Vietnamese rule, have taken flight.

By April 30, Saigon was formally renamed Ho Chi Minh City and the United States embassy was abandoned. The unification of North and South Vietnam under communist rule was well under way, and refugees were even more desperate to avoid the new regime. Most plotted their escape via road or by sea. Thousands flooded the city's ports, mobbing docks and crowding the decks of all navigable vessels. For every person who fought their way onto a ship, many more were left behind.

Bich Minh Nguyen was not left behind. Just eight months old, she and her family—everyone except her mother—miraculously made it onto a departing ship. After stops at refugee camps in the Philippines, Guam, and Arkansas, they started a new life in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

In her memoir *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, Bich Minh Nguyen chronicles this new life as she navigates competing and conflicting cultural identities and struggles to fit into a



community where she often feels like an outsider. Bich forgoes any rigidly defined identity and instead creates her own.

Despite this, there is still an essential influence that's unaccounted for: her mother. As the book reaches its startling conclusion, Bich discovers her mother's true story. In doing so, she discovers a missing piece of her own.

Studded with pop culture references and narrated with a youthful, honest, and accessible voice, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* inspires readers to investigate their cultural influences, explore their family roots, and discover how contemporary events have affected their lives.



Bich

BICH MINH NGUYEN (pronounced *bit min win*) was born in Saigon in 1974. When North Vietnamese forces took over the city in 1975, she and her family fled Vietnam as refugees and eventually resettled in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They were part of the first significant wave of Vietnamese immigration to the United States.

Bich spent her childhood in Grand Rapids and attended the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in English in 1996 and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing in 1998.

Currently, she is an associate professor in the English department at Purdue University. Her first book, *Stealing Buddha's*



Minh Nguyen

Dinner, won the PEN/Jerard Fund Award and received critical acclaim for its honest, convincing portrait of a young woman's coming of age in a community whose dominant culture, appearance, and lifestyle had little resemblance to her own.

Her forthcoming novel, *Short Girls*, will be released July 2009. Her writings have appeared in *Gourmet*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Dream Me Home Safely: Writers on Growing Up in America*, and *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose*. She has co-edited three anthologies.

Bich is married to novelist Porter Shreve and resides in Chicago and West Lafayette, Indiana.





Immigration Stories

The story of Vietnamese American immigration mirrors that of other immigrant groups, who, for centuries, have come to the United States to seek prosperity, escape repression, or rejoin their families, among other reasons.

In 1975, an estimated 150,000 Vietnamese immigrated to the United States. Most were refugees, fleeing the communist government, which had expanded its rule to include South Vietnam.

The United States government played an active role in their resettlement, partnering with private organizations (usually religious) to ease the strains of relocation. This was a marked departure from earlier policies. Until 1965, people of Asian origin faced additional barriers to United States immigration and citizenship. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act suspended Chinese immigration to America; the Immigration Act of 1924 excluded immigrants from Japan, China, Vietnam, India, and other Asian countries.

Most Vietnamese immigrants settled in California, Texas, or Louisiana. Others created pockets of Vietnamese communities in places like West Michigan, where 797 Vietnamese had settled by 1976, including Bich Minh Nguyen's family. By 2006, according to the United States Census, the population of Vietnamese Americans numbered at least 1,475,000. In 31 years, this population expanded nearly tenfold.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Does immigration play a role in your family's history? What is your family's immigration story?
- The term "1.5 generation" (1.5G) refers to those who immigrate to a new country at a young age, spending many or all of their formative years in their new land. How might the experience of 1.5G differ from first- or second-generation immigrants?
- All immigrants assimilate—in varying degrees—to life in their new home. What are some examples of assimilation? What factors play a role in this process? Does it matter whether an immigrant assimilates to a lesser or larger extent? Why?
- Refugees are those who escape a country or power to evade persecution. Throughout history, many have claimed this status in an attempt to immigrate to the United States. Why did the United States government assist the immigration of Vietnamese refugees in 1975? Why might it help in the case of some countries but not others?
- At various times in United States history, certain groups faced additional barriers to immigration and/or citizenship. What attitudes might affect whether some immigrants are deemed "desirable" and others not? Is this the case today? How so?
- Newly arrived immigrants often settle in communities consisting of other recent immigrants, usually of the same background. Why is this the case? Is this always true? Compare immigrant communities now with those of the past.
- Recent technological advances—the Internet, satellite television, international phone services—allow immigrants to maintain strong links with their country of origin. How might this affect the experience of immigrants in their new country?
- What factors could lead immigrants from thousands of miles away to settle in Michigan?



Cultural Understanding

In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, Bich Minh Nguyen is unlike most people living in Grand Rapids. She was born in Vietnam. She looks different, eats different foods, lives in a multi-generational household, and practices a different religion. Bich's stepmother is Mexican. She often feels like an outsider.

Instead of choosing one identity—Vietnamese, Mexican, or American—Bich ultimately creates her own. To do so, she must come to terms with her heritage and the others surrounding her.

Bich embraces food as a real and symbolic bridge to other cultures. In elementary school, the food she brings for lunch is different from that of other students. The dinners fixed by her stepmother and grandmother aren't like those fixed by her friends' parents. Instead of pork chops, Shake 'n Bake, and mashed potatoes, Bich's family eats *sopa*, stir fry, and *phở*.

Bich longs to eat what everyone else eats—"American" food, things like chicken nuggets, frozen pizzas, and macaroni and cheese. In Bich's mind, to do so is to become more American.

At the same time, Bich still loves Vietnamese cuisine: spring rolls (*chả giò*), summer rolls (*gỏi cuốn*), sausage balls (*bánh bao*), and other specialties. She also loves the Mexican food—in particular, tamales—she eats with her stepmother's family.

All of these competing cultural influences play out on Bich's plate. In the end, as she matures, Bich realizes that cultural boundaries aren't as rigid as she once thought.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How would you describe Bich's cultural identity? As she creates her own cultural identity, how is it important for her to understand the cultures that influence her? Why is food important in Bich's cultural development?
- Early in the book, Bich's stepmother Rosa removes the fruit Bich's grandmother has placed as an offering to Buddha. Rosa, who is not Buddhist, realizes her mistake. Later, she says, "It's your custom." Have you experienced or witnessed a similar misunderstanding? If so, what was done to rectify the situation? What was the outcome?
- Consider the factors (i.e., ethnicity, religion, community, politics, etc.) that shape your identity. How do these differ from your parents and your grandparents? How do these differ from your peers?
- How do forces like peer pressure, popular culture, and mass marketing affect the formation of one's cultural identity? How have they shaped your identity?
- Consider all of the ways that people can differ in terms of culture. Can you think of a community where everyone's culture is the same? Think of communities where, on the surface, this might appear to be true. Do you think this is actually the case? How so?
- Have you ever felt like an outsider in your community, school, or family? How so?
- Compared with other issues, do differences in religion pose additional challenges when it comes to acceptance and understanding? Why do you believe this is the case?



Contemporary History

Many people point to a specific event as a defining moment for their generation. These events are sometimes tragic: the attack on Pearl Harbor, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., or the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Other times, they are triumphal: the moon landing, civil rights legislation, or an epic work of art or literature.

While a single event might brand a generation, the reality is that many contemporary events work together to define and shape people's lives. This holds true for events near and far, as well as for the broadest historical trends.

This is especially true in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*. It's doubtful Bich and her family would have immigrated to America had it not been for the Vietnam War. Once they arrive, their suburban community—whose detached, single-family households and limited mass transit were the result of a massive national social realignment—determined how and with whom they interacted.

Likewise, Western Michigan's reliance on migrant agricultural workers—mostly of Mexican heritage—facilitated Bich's father's marriage to Rosa, whose family came to the region to work on local farms. Even broader trends in popular culture—the rise and fall of disco, the debut of MTV, the ubiquity of prepackaged and fast food—influenced Bich and her family's wants, tastes, mores, and desires. In short, Bich—like all of us—is a product of her time.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the defining historical event of your life, if any? Do you believe that it plays a role in shaping how you view the world? How so?
- Bich is part of what some call “Generation X,” a cohort consisting of people born between 1961 and 1981. This and other generations—the Greatest Generation, the Boomers, the Millennials—are classifications created by demographers, marketers, journalists, and others as a framework for explaining a population’s shared experience. There is limited consensus in defining this framework; in addition, many argue that these labels oversimplify matters, and that they serve to stereotype their members. Do you consider yourself a member of a specific generation? What are the broader historical influences that impact your generation? How are these classifications useful—or detrimental—in explaining social behavior?
- Do you believe that you are shaped by history, that you play an active role in shaping history, or both? How is this true for you and your family?
- How have historical events connected Michigan with people in other parts of the world, many thousands of miles away? How have technological developments in communications, transport, etc., played a role in these connections? What is Michigan’s role in the global economy?
- How does the Vietnam War continue to impact the American political, social, and cultural landscape? How does this compare with other conflicts, like World War II, which is often called “The Good War”? Is there such a thing as a “good war”?



The following resources provide additional information and perspectives related to the themes in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*. For additional resources, please consult the 2009–10 Great Michigan Read Teacher's Guide (fall 2009).

PRIMARY RESOURCES

The Great Michigan Read: www.michiganhumanities.org.
Stealing Buddha's Dinner. Bich Minh Nguyen. 2007. Hardcover, paperback, audiobook, and ebook versions available.
Bich Minh Nguyen: www.bichminhnguyen.com

BOOKS

- A Sense of Duty: My Father, My American Journey*. Quang X. Pham. 2005.
- Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*. Sucheng Chan. 1991.
- Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam*. Andrew X. Pham. 2000.
- The Eaves of Heaven: A Life in Three Wars*. Andrew X. Pham. 2008.
- The Father of All Things: A Marine, His Son, and the Legacy of Vietnam*. Tom Bissell. 2007.
- Flight to Freedom: The Story of the Vietnamese of West Michigan*. Gordon L. Olson (editor). 2004.
- Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese-American Lives*. James Freeman. 1991
- Into the Vietnamese Kitchen: Treasured Foodways, Modern Flavors*. Andrea Quynhgioa Nguyen. 2006.
- Monkey Bridge*. Lan Cao. 1998.
- Paradise of the Blind*. Duong Thu Huong. 1988.
- Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora*. Andrew Lam. 2005.
- Short Girls: A Novel*. Bich Minh Nguyen. Forthcoming (July 2009).
- The Vietnam War and American Culture*. Rick Berg and John Carlos Rowe (editors). 1992.
- The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight and New Beginnings*. Sucheng Chan (editor). 2006.

Voices of Vietnamese Boat People: Nineteen Narratives of Escape and Survival. Mary Terrell Cargill and Jade Ngoc Quang Huynh (editors). 2001.

We Should Never Meet: Stories. Aimee Phan. 2005.

When Heaven and Earth Changed Places. Le Ly Hayslip. 1989.

FILMS

Daughter from Danang. Vicente Franco and Gail Dolgin (directors). 2004. DVD.

The Fall of Saigon (part of *Vietnam: A Television History*). 1983. DVD.

From Saigon to Sanctuary: The Story of Vietnamese Refugees in West Michigan. Grand Rapids Historical Commission and West Michigan Vietnamese History Committee. 2002. DVD.

Journey from the Fall. Ham Tran (director). 2007. DVD.

Heaven & Earth. Oliver Stone (director). 1993. DVD.

WEB

Teaching Tolerance: Vietnamese Americans. Southern Poverty Law Center. www.tolerance.org/teach/web/vietnamese/index.jsp

EXHIBITS

Gerald R. Ford Museum, 303 Pearl St. NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49504; (616) 254-0400; www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov.

In addition to highlighting the lives of President and Mrs. Ford, the Museum displays the actual rooftop staircase used to evacuate the United States Embassy in Saigon in 1975.

Public Museum, Grand Rapids, 272 Pearl St. NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49504; (616) 456-3977; www.grmuseum.org.

The permanent exhibit, *Newcomers: The People of This Place*, highlights the 45 ethnic groups that make their home in West Michigan, including the Vietnamese.

The Great Michigan Read



Michigan Humanities Council

The Michigan Humanities Council connects people and communities by fostering and creating quality cultural programs. It is Michigan's nonprofit affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Since 1974, the Council has supported thousands of cultural programs exploring the humanities in Michigan.

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