Charles Waugh, associate professor of English, breaks new ground in international literature with a new anthology of today's Vietnamese writers.

Not Our Fathers' Vietnam: Groundbreaking Anthology Offers New Insight

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Many Americans still think of Vietnam as the name of a war, not a country.


Unwittingly, we've become trapped in what author Charles Waugh calls a “historical prison.”

“When Americans think of Vietnam, we tend to think of our experience there,” he said. “We don't think of what the country is like today.”

Today, the children and grandchildren of that country’s veterans think little of war. Theirs is a original, hopeful voice colored by the frenetic streets of Hanoi and Saigon (Ho Chi Min City) and the brilliant cleanliness of factories. Now, their insights have been captured in a new anthology of short stories collected, edited and translated in part by Waugh, an associate professor of English. It is published in trade paperback by Curbstone, an imprint of Northwestern University Press.

Wild Mustard is the first-ever anthology to introduce these young writers to English speakers. His goal, he says, is “to bring Vietnamese voices to the United States, to tell their stories in a way that's moving, in beautiful language and with emotion that allows us to make connections with these characters,” he said.

“This is a story that most Americans just aren’t aware of.”

The anthology’s authentic voice has been endorsed by the most renown Vietnamese writing in English. “From country to city and from the past to the present, these powerful, vividly translated stories illuminate a vibrant, conflicted society that is electric with emotion,” Viet Thanh Nguyen said in a review. Nguyen is the author of The Sympathizer, winner of the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

The authors of the anthology’s 19 stories write of hope, disorientation, love, loss, good fortune and ambition — topics not owned by any one country or people. All are professional writers of some sort — magazine editors and screen writers, for instance. They offer mysteries and love stories, fantasy and coming-of-age tales. Their commonality is that all were children during the period of doi moi, the 1986 reforms that discarded communism and moved the country to a market economy.

“I'm really trying to show what life is like for them,” he said, “to get a sense of what that change for them has meant and how their culture has changed.”

Nine years after doi moi, the United States normalized relations with Vietnam. This marked an end to 50 years of war and sanctions that began with the French in the 1950s and continued following the U.S. departure with conflicts with the Khmer Rouge in Laos and China.

At the same time, the internet and global TV networks brought the world right to the Vietnamese. “They've been isolated for 50 years,” Waugh said. “And suddenly they're connected to the world in more ways than they could ever have imagined.”

Today’s pace is led by a generation that Waugh describes as “go-getters who are all striving to make it work.” He sees people in “all kinds of service jobs, computers,
advertising, design, all those things just like any city in the United States.”

Waugh was himself a teenager in the late 1970s and early ’80s when Hollywood began exploring America’s post-war hang-ups. Fascinated by this still recent American experience, Waugh watched every film he could. That’s when he first noticed there were few Vietnamese, soldiers or otherwise, on screen.

“There was an erasure of Vietnamese from that picture,” he says.

He learned that while America’s war dead numbered about 58,000, more than 4 million Vietnamese were killed or died from disease and destitution.

Waugh turned his historical and, eventually, literary attention to this southeastern Asia country, learning the language as a master’s student and in extended stays, including an award of a Fulbright Scholarship to teach at the Vietnam National University in Hanoi.

Vietnamese is a notoriously difficult language to translate into English, mainly because it’s more fluid in its use of verb tenses and grammar. Waugh worked through those obstacles with Lien Nguyen, professor emeritus at Vietnam National University. Their previous work as co-editors is Family of Fallen Leaves: Stories of Agent Orange by Vietnamese Writers (University of Georgia Press, 2010).

The book earns it title from a story that Waugh says beautifully illustrates the country’s seismic shift. The story’s speaker recalls the mustard seeds his grandmother sold at village markets.

“He takes as a metaphor that he and his generation are like these mustard seeds that are very light, that flake apart and are easily blown by the wind,” Waugh said. “For him, it’s a sense of being scattered and not being rooted in the environment in the same way as the traditional lifestyle. It’s both good and bad.”

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