

EDUCATORS RECOMMEND *THE MOUNTAINS SING* FOR CLASSROOMS

Penn Szitty, Professor Emeritus, Georgetown University; Board of Directors, Lannan Foundation: “Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai’s monumental historical novel, *The Mountain Sings*, should be required reading in schools and colleges everywhere. It tells the poignant history of the resilience, courage, and resistance of the Vietnamese people – represented so compellingly by the life stories of two women, Diêu Lan and her granddaughter, Hương – at the hands of domestic and imperial powers over nearly a century. These are wrenching stories of displacement, loss, and family separation, yet at the same time, tales countered by a compelling love of the homeland – mountains, birdsong, hoa sen flowers, bàng trees, the verdant fragrance (Hương’s name means “fragrance”) of the rice fields and mountain pathways, a lyrical celebration of a land of beauty whose poetry is embodied in its people. The novel has been honored with an international Lannan Literary Awards Fellowship for its exceptional literary quality, and for its contribution to peace and reconciliation. It is a book for teachers who want to provoke their students to think deeply about American exceptionalism, social justice, the savage cost of colonialism and empires, the rights of indigenous peoples, the perils of strident factionalism within a nation, the resilient strength of the poor, the courage of women, the sacred character of the land of one’s ancestors.”

Xu Xi, Faculty Co-Director, International MFA in Creative Writing & Literary Translation, Vermont College of Fine Arts: “*The Mountains Sing* by Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai is a novel of Vietnam that is long overdue. For the first time, we are seeing the war from the Vietnamese themselves in their own country. This book is a first step in completing the narrative of a war that devastated too many lives, and gives us a glimpse into the ancient culture, language and traditions that shape modern Vietnam in this engaging and heartfelt tale.”

Professor Wayne Karlin, College of Southern Maryland: “I have found that whether I am teaching a course in Việt Nam War and Post-War literature or contemporary novels, American and otherwise, often students find *The Mountains Sing* the book that most engrossed them, most enlarged their conceptions of the world in general and Việt Nam in particular, and that they just plain enjoyed reading. Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai’s lyrical, descriptive writing is deeply experiential: it allows them to feel absorbed by the sights, sounds and tastes of another country and another time, while the drama of the family saga at the center of the novel, tragic with loss, triumphant with strength, engages them profoundly. Set within Việt Nam’s war-torn twentieth-century history, and told by two strong female protagonists torn and tested by that history, it offers a perspective often absent from other narratives about that subject. It’s become oft-remarked that most American literature about the Việt Nam War leaves out the Vietnamese; in that light, I found teaching *The Mountains Sing* as comparative literature, paired, for example, with O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, or with Marlantes’ *Matterhorn*, immerses students into a complex history and a complex humanity in a way that remains both personal and transformative.”

Professor Viet Thanh Nguyen, Aerol Arnold Chair of English, University of Southern California: “*The Mountains Sing* is a triumph, a novelistic rendition of one of the most difficult times in Vietnamese history, an epic account of Việt Nam’s painful 20th century history, both

vast in scope and intimate in its telling. Through the travails of one family, Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai brings us close to the horrors of famine, war, and class struggle. But in this moving and riveting novel, she also shows us a postwar Việt Nam, a country of hope and renewal, home to a people who have never given up.”

Dr. Sofia Rehman, independent scholar: “One of the greatest abuses of history is the wilful silencing of the voices and experiences of the weak and marginalised. Any curriculum seeking to decolonise the literary canon would be incomplete without Quế Mai’s *The Mountain Sing*. This beautifully crafted inter-generational story of the Trần family set against the backdrop of some of Việt Nam’s most darkest moments in recent history stands as a corrective to the hegemony of American imperialist narratives which permeate most curriculums and mainstream media discourse on Việt Nam. It offers a rich insight into a range of themes including family, love, war, famine, peace, trauma, healing and so much more. It opens up Việt Nam to its readers not as casual distant tourists, but as friends invited to steep themselves in the language, culture, landscape and peoples. Students and educators alike will relish in the language and lyricism of Quế Mai’s poetic writing and her artful structuring of the story, as well as from the historical lessons that despite the specificity of their location impart morals that are truly universal in nature, reminding us all of our collective and interconnected humanity.”

Sofia Akel - Race Equity Lead, Centre for Equity & Inclusion, London Metropolitan University: "*The Mountains Sing* is a masterclass in decolonial historical fiction. Nguyễn frequently tells the story in Vietnamese, juxtaposing it in the language of the publishing country and there is no attempt to anglicise or water down her culture for a Western audience - which is exactly how it should be. Generations of Vietnamese people speak through her visceral writing and provide, arguably for the first time in recent years, a sensitive yet deeply educational and profound telling of not only the Vietnam War but also the Vietnamese history and culture, centering those whose voices have been omitted, especially by the Western narrative."

Dr Tahia Abdel Nasser, Associate Professor and Chair, English and Comparative Literature, The American University in Cairo: “*The Mountains Sing* was the highlight of my Creative Writing class. The class read *The Mountains Sing* to deepen understanding of the craft and practice of fiction writing. Students appreciated the prose style and texture, characters, and sense of place very much and looked at them anew through the novel. *The Mountains Sing* is a beautiful book whose lush and poetic prose delights and surprises. It is rare to have a Vietnamese novel in English that focuses on Vietnam and Vietnamese history. The language is sumptuous, steeped in Vietnamese culture and proverbs, the story is rich, the characters authentic. We read a devastating history in language as beautiful as a bird’s song.”

Mr Danny Nason, Senior Head of Nansen House, Island International School, Hong Kong: “As an IB Language and Literature teacher, I have taught Tim O’Brien’s magnificent *The Things They Carried*, for a number of years and students have loved learning about the American-Vietnam war, finding it fascinating and often using it as a platform to learn more about this defining epoch in the 21st Century. However, I always longed to be able to provide them with accompanying texts from the Vietnamese perspective, to balance out the white, western homogeneity of the texts on offer in their curriculum. Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai’s exquisite *The Mountains Sing* would be the perfect novel to add diversity to the IB text choices. It is a

beautiful, lyrical tale, full of rich language that can be discussed and analysed by knowledgeable inquirers. It offers a female perspective on Vietnam's history, and on war in general and, as such, would again challenge the dominant narratives that students may be used to, further reinforcing the IB's desire to raise global citizens. It is a text that raises challenging questions about family and duty, and many other themes, and the language is vibrant with local idioms, which could help bridge the study of language and literature in compelling ways. For students taking IB history, it would add further layers to their understanding of the war and would stimulate much discussion about historiography and political ideologies."

Professor Quan Manh Ha, University of Montana: "*The Mountains Sing* vividly and rivetingly captures the important historical milestones in Vietnamese history of the 20th century through the oral storytelling traditions of various generations. The complex history of Vietnam with the West, especially with France and the United States, is retold and reimagined from the multiple perspectives and voices of the characters. What interests me the most is the author's virtuosic depiction of the Vietnamese landscape and the people's love for nature, which is juxtaposed against the ravages of war and political upheavals. This absorbing novel is a great resource for students who are interested in learning about modern Vietnamese history, culture, and domestic tensions caused by war and political oppression."

Chris Baker M.Ed, MLIS, Adult Services Librarian, New Bern-Craven County Public Library: "As a student and one time teacher of history, I see a gross neglect on my part and those of teachers like me to broaden our student's understanding of armed conflict and the human impact thereof. Too often history and war particularly is boiled down to dates, causes, and peppered occasionally a personal first hand. It takes the novelist, dramatist, and poet to plumb the depths of the past. *The Mountains Sing* by Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai at once takes the reader back in time and mines the human emotions wrought by war. We are shown a people and culture that until recently has been written off as unworthy of study. Reading *The Mountains Sing*, we can find all that is missing from dry history texts: It only through good fiction, that readers are allowed to explore the very fiber of human experience in the midst of chaos, joy, despair and hope."