



## BOOK CLUB KIT

"ANOTHER TRIUMPH . . . Powerful, heartbreaking, and deeply empathetic."  
—VIET THANH NGUYEN, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Sympathizer*

# DUST CHILD

A Novel



NGUYỄN PHAN QUẾ MAI

AUTHOR OF THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER  
*THE MOUNTAINS SING*

# A Note from the Author

Dear Readers,

In September 2015, I wrote an article on *Tuổi Trẻ*, a national newspaper of Việt Nam, about four American veterans returning to Việt Nam to search for the Vietnamese women who had once been pregnant with their children. The article included a letter one of the veterans had written to his former Vietnamese girlfriend, explaining why he had left her in 1969 and why he has been coming back to look for her.

Three weeks after the article's publication, a woman contacted me to say she might know someone who knew the veteran who wrote the letter. As we spoke on the phone, after asking many questions about me and my work, the woman paused, took a deep breath, and told me: she had once been the girlfriend of the veteran who had written that letter. She said she hadn't told her story to a single soul during the past 40 years. Not even her husband and children knew. She was a bar girl in Sài Gòn during the war and became romantically involved with an American soldier. When she became pregnant, her American boyfriend left her. She was heartbroken. She couldn't afford to raise her baby so she gave her daughter to an orphanage. After the war, she searched for her daughter but could not find her. She said that not a single day has gone by that she doesn't think about her daughter.

So, it was a great shock to read her daughter's father's name and his letter in the newspaper. She couldn't believe that he was back looking for her. She wanted to talk to him. She wanted me to give him her phone number.

I connected them, and the veteran didn't just call the woman immediately, he went back to Việt Nam to see her. Their reunion, after 46 years, was full of tears and laughter. They decided to remain friends and help each other in their search for their daughter. Both did DNA testing. They have tried many ways, but sadly, as I write these words, they have not found their daughter.

During the past many years of helping people find each other all this time after the end of the war in Việt Nam, I was compelled to write *Dust Child*—a book that fictionalizes the experiences of Amerasians and their parents. Through my characters Phong, Trang, Quỳnh, Dan, Linda, and Thiên, I would like to acknowledge the trauma and humanity of all sides and show the courage of people trying to break the cycles of intergenerational trauma and offer heal-



ing for themselves and those around them.

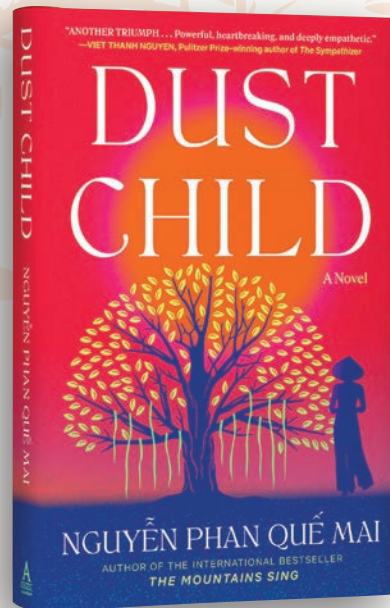
*Dust Child* is, in part, my fight against the misrepresentations of Vietnamese women commonly found in Hollywood movies and books written by Westerners about Việt Nam. So often, we are reduced to sexual objects, helpless victims with no trauma and no agency. This novel is also my fight against the sexism and racism that still exists within my own Vietnamese community.

*Dust Child* took me seven years to write. This novel is an act of remembrance of the many generations of Vietnamese and Americans and their children whose lives continue to be devastated nearly fifty years after the end of the war between America and Việt Nam. I also wrote this book to offer my prayers for a world with more compassion, more peace, more forgiveness, and more healing. I sincerely thank you for joining me in my mission.

Sending much love,

Quế Mai

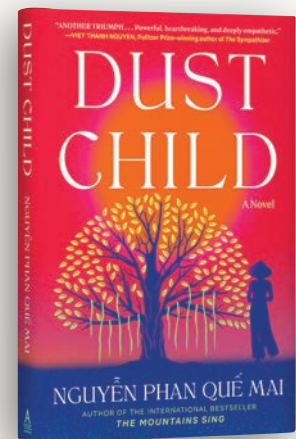
Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai



# Questions for Discussion

## DUST CHILD

1. What did you know about Amerasians born into the Việt Nam War before you read this book? How do Phong's experiences influence your thoughts about the impact of wars on women and children? What could be done to prevent these situations?
2. Were you aware of the number of Vietnamese women who worked in bars that served American soldiers? Describe the nature of the trauma and social ostracism that Trang and Quỳnh faced. How did the experience influence the relationship between the two sisters?
3. Describe Dan when he first arrived in Việt Nam in 1969. Why was Trang first attracted to him? Trace how—and how much—the war changed Dan. Do you think wars have the power to change the moral character of human beings?
4. Which elements of Vietnamese culture described in *Dust Child* stood out to you?
5. Via the experiences of Linda and Thanh (the son of the Northern Vietnamese veteran who suffers from Alzheimer's), describe how war trauma is inherited by family members. What have Linda and Thanh done to help their loved ones cope with their trauma?
6. Discuss the ethics and complexity involved in the Amerasians' search for missing parents. How do these ethical issues compare to other instances of people searching for their birth parents or lost family members?
7. How does Phong demonstrate his determination to survive and prosper? Describe his transformation throughout the book.
8. Describe the difficult decisions that Trang and Quỳnh had to make. What would you have done if you were in their situation?
9. What is Dan's initial motivation for returning to Việt Nam? Do his reasons change during his trip? If so, how and why?
10. In *Dust Child*, Vietnamese words appear with their full diacritical marks in chapters written from the viewpoints of Vietnamese speakers. These marks are necessary to interpret meaning: for example, in Nun Nhã's name, *nhã* means "elegant," while *nhà* means "house," *nhả* means "release," *nhạ* means "music," *nha* means "teeth" or "dental," *nhá* means "to chew carefully." In chapters written from Dan's voice, the diacritical marks are stripped away. Did the use of diacritical marks affect your reading experience? What do these two ways of representing the Vietnamese language show you? Does Dan's understanding of the importance of diacritics change?
11. In the novel, Quỳnh says, "She had tried to live an honest life, but the war had given her no choice. It had forced her to make up a version of herself which was acceptable to others. In a way, making up stories had been the basis of her survival and her success." Can lies be necessary for love, survival, and dignity? Were you surprised at Quỳnh's decision, and what do you think about her as a mother?
12. Which Vietnamese proverbs in the book are your favorites? Which ones demean Vietnamese women? Do you have similar proverbs in your culture?
13. Have you tried any of the Vietnamese food described in the novel? Which ones would you like to eat and/or try to cook?
14. "Conversation about books represented the most intimate discourse. It revealed a person's values, beliefs, fears, and hopes. Experiencing the same books enabled people to travel on similar journeys and brought them closer together," Dan reflected in the novel. Do you agree with Dan's reflection in the novel? Has your book club enriched your life? If so, how?



# Musical Instruments Featured in **DUST CHILD**

Phong loves *cải lương* music, Vietnamese folk opera. *Cải lương* music is accompanied by these special instruments:



**ĐÀN SẾN**  
the two-string fiddle  
(Phong plays this instrument)



**GUITAR PHÍM LỖ**  
guitar with carved fretboard



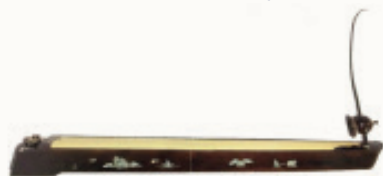
**ĐÀN NGUYỆT**  
the moon lute



**ĐÀN TỖ BÀ**  
the pear-shaped lute



**ĐÀN TRANH**  
the sixteen-string zither



**ĐÀN BẦU**  
the monochord

Source of photos: Commons Wikimedia

# Vietnamese Music & Poetry in **DUST CHILD**

*Dust Child* presents Việt Nam as a country rich in literary and musical traditions. Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai has curated this playlist of songs which appear in the book, in the order of their appearances, as well as an excerpt from the epic poem, *The Tale of Kiều*.

## **CÁT BỤI (Sand and Dust)**

music and lyrics by Trịnh Công Sơn,  
sung by Khánh Ly

## **CHIẾC KHĂN PIÊU (The Piêu scarf)**

music and lyrics by Doãn Nho, sung by Tùng Dương

## **LAN VÀ ĐIỆP**

a traditional *cải lương* song,  
sung by Phương Thúy and Bùi Trung Đăng

## **ĐẠ CỔ HOÀI LANG (Night Drum Beats Cause Longing for Absent Husband)**

a *cải lương* Vietnamese opera song by Cao Văn Lầu,  
sung by Hương Lan

## **PHẠM CÔNG CÚC HOA**

### **(The Tale of Phạm Công Cúc Hoa)**

a *cải lương* Vietnamese opera, performed by  
Đình Quý, Bích Ngọc, Hồng Phượng, Mộng Trinh

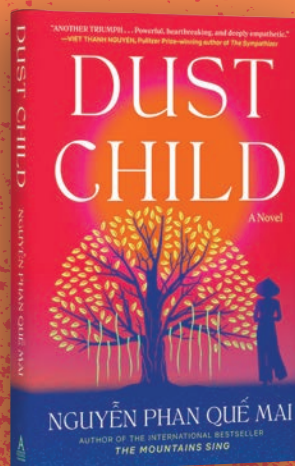
## **RU CON NAM BỘ**

### **(A Southern Vietnamese Lullaby)**

a traditional folksong, sung by Thu Hiền

## **TRUYỆN KIỀU (The Tale of Kiều)**

an excerpt, read by Vietnamese Light and Literature



# Timeline of Historical and Fictional Events for DUST CHILD

The United States uses Tân Sơn Nhất Airport as a major base, stationing Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine units there.

1959

The U.S. begins spraying herbicides in Việt Nam. Nearly 19 million gallons are used in total during the war, including at least 11 million gallons of Agent Orange.

1962

Trang and Quỳnh go to Sài Gòn to work at the Hollywood Bar.  
Dan arrives in Việt Nam and is stationed at Tân Sơn Nhất.

Nixon initiates the “Vietnamization” policy to gradually shift combat responsibilities to the Army of the Republic of Việt Nam (ARVN).

1969

1970

Dan’s tour of duty ends and he leaves Việt Nam.

Phong is born.

1972

January 27, 1973: The Paris Peace Accords is signed, ending the American participation in the war.

Phong moves into Phú Long orphanage.

1973

March 29, 1973: The last US combat troops leave Việt Nam.

April 30, 1975: The Việt Nam War ends.  
The New Economic Zones program and re-education camps are established.

1975

Phong is forced to leave his orphanage for the Lâm Đồng New Economic Zone with Nun Nhã.

1982

October 22, 1982: Congress enacted the Amerasian Act to allow Amerasians to seek admission to the US as lawful permanent residents.

Nun Nhã dies. Phong runs away from the New Economic Zone and becomes homeless.

1984

June 1987: Phong is imprisoned in re-education camps.

1987

December 22, 1987: Congress passes the Amerasian Homecoming Act.

December 1989: The Amerasian Transit Center, a result of the Amerasian Homecoming Act, is completed in Hồ Chí Minh City.

1989

Phong applies for a visa under the Amerasian Homecoming Act with the Khuất family.

His application is rejected and he finds housing at the Amerasian Transit Center.

1992

US and Việt Nam normalize relations.

1995

Phong is again homeless and drifts to Bạc Liêu town where he meets his future wife, Bình.

1997

The Amerasian Transit Center closes.

Dan returns to Việt Nam with Linda.

2016

Entries in blue are real-life historical events; red is for the lives of the fictional characters

