

# “The Boat”

by Nam Le

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“You could totally exploit the whole Vietnamese thing”, a friend tells Nam, the protagonist in the first story of *The Boat*, “But instead, you choose to write about lesbian vampires and Colombian assassins, and Hiroshima orphans — and New York painters with haemorrhoids”

There are unfortunately no lesbian vampires in *The Boat*, but the rest of the cast are there. For his stunning debut collection Nam Le takes the reader on a global journey, and presents us with a remarkably varied cast of protagonists.

What is most remarkable about the collection is Nam Le’s ability to believably and deftly inhabit such a variety of characters. Each of his protagonists speaks with authenticity and the reader does not for a moment doubt their voice.

If there is a common theme in his stories, it is the struggle of each of his protagonists to survive in a world suddenly without boundaries and where all that they know is ripped from them, leaving them floundering for survival.

The opening story of the collection, *Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice*, is a clever play on fact and fiction, with the

narrator Nam seeming to reflect the life of the author.

Nam Le has placed his protagonist at the prestigious Iowa Writers Workshop, which he himself attended; both were born in Vietnam, and raised in Australia; and both left a lucrative career as lawyers to become authors.

We meet the fictional Nam at a particularly low point in his life. He is suffering from writers block, and he is forced to play a reluctant host to his distant, disapproving father.

Nam longs to write stories about faraway people and places, but is urged to write a story about Vietnam. “Ethnic literature’s hot”, he is told. “And important too”. Nam, at a loss, decides to write his father’s story.

What follows could easily have become a conventional story of father-son reconciliation; the reader may feel in familiar territory here, but Nam Le adroitly sidesteps any expectations.

Nam’s father recounts his story of surviving the My Lai massacre as a 14-year-old boy, buried underneath his mother’s dead body. He is then conscripted into the South Vietnamese Army and fights with the American Army.

When asked how he could fight on the side of the Americans, he replies: “I had nothing but hate in me, but I had enough for everyone”. He then endures a re-education camp, where he is tortured and indoctrinated. In 1979 he organized the family’s escape to Australia by boat.

As the story unfolds, it becomes more than a meditation on a father and son trying to find a common ground, and Nam is sadly left with the realisation that though they may be closer in understanding, the gulf created by experience is something that cannot be overcome.

“Here is what I believe,” Nam says, “We forgive any sacrifice by our parents, so long as it is not made in our name. To my father there was no other name — only mine, and he had named me after the homeland he had given up.

“His sacrifice was complete and compelled him to everything that happened. To all that, I was inadequate.”

The second story is *Cartenega*, a painful exploration of loyalty and friendship, and the heartbreaking sacrifices that our circumstances call on us to make.

*Cartenega* immediately subverts any expectations the reader may have of the author’s intent, and sets us up for the rest of the collection. We are swept away from the workshops in Iowa, to the slums of South America and to the world of our narrator, Juan Pablo, a 14-year-old hitman from Medellín.

Juan, like the others in this collection, is at a painful crossroads in his life. To date he has been a loyal and efficient killer, but when he is ordered to kill one of his closest friends, he finds himself unable to do so, and is summoned before the boss, known as “El Padre” to answer for his transgression.

Juan’s tension and dread of the upcoming meeting set the backdrop to the story. Juan is well aware of his dire situation; his fear of his inevitable demise resonates throughout, giving the story a heavy sense of oppression. The language Le uses, at once lyrical and idiomatic, is utterly convincing, and never for a moment does the reader doubt his voice, or that of the narrator.

Le vividly paints the grime and poverty, and Medellín, and how they force children into untenable choices. But Le does not mire Juan or the reader in hopelessness. Even through his fear, Juan maintains a sense of hope and a will to survive; a dream that he may escape his life and, with his friend, go to the seaside of *Cartenega*.

In *Meeting Elise* we are again back in the US, to meet Henry Luff, an ageing, vain, Manhattan painter, grieving the death of his muse. Henry has recently been diagnosed with possible cancer, and is attempting to reconcile with his estranged daughter Elise on the eve of her cello performance at Carnegie Hall before it is too late.

The indignities of Henry’s illness

and his outrage and shock are presented with both pathos and humour. Henry’s narration is at once comic and pathetic, and his world is beautifully rendered. And in Henry’s desperation to reach his indifferent daughter and his angry determination to stave off his demise, we recognise a flawed, all too human creation that we can be sympathetic to.

Le all too believably portrays the desperation of Henry, his vanity and arrogance; and that ultimately Henry’s need for reconciliation is less about his daughter, and more about holding back his own mortality.

*Tehran Calling* again sweeps us across the globe, to Iran. Sarah, a young American lawyer, is overwhelmed by a recent romantic break up, and travels to Tehran to visit her college friend Parvin, who works for women’s causes, and is regarded as a political dissident.

Sarah has idealised her days of friendship and looks to Parvin as a refuge, refusing to recognise that circumstances will have forged changes in her friend, and is unable to let go of who she needs Parvin to be. Sarah finds herself caught up in an oppressive world, where every safety she has taken for granted is an illusion, and her naïve assumptions about friendship, and the cost of freedom are questioned.

Le portrays Sarah as any one of us; outsiders in a foreign and frightening landscape, trying to define that foreign world by our own rules and judgements, and always failing to do so.

Loss and change are the central themes of *Halflead Bay*, the collection’s longest story, set in a small Victorian coastal town. The protagonist, 15-year-old Jamie has for the first time won recognition at school as a football hero, and has attracted the flirtatious attractions of the glamorous Alison.

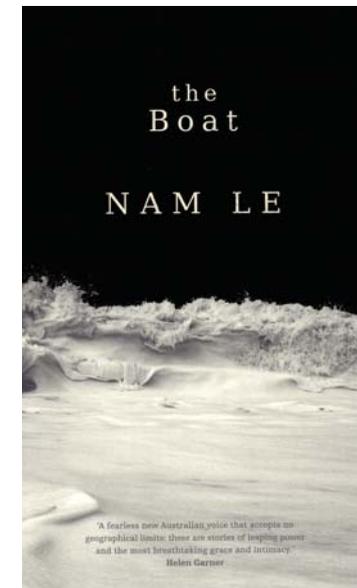
Jamie encourages her flirtations, and now her boyfriend, the town bully with a brutish and murderous reputation is coming after Jamie.

What seems set to be a simple coming of age story is upset by the deeper changes in Jamie’s life. His mother is dying of Multiple Sclerosis,

and he, his brother, and father, struggle daily to deal with her impending death.

His father also risks losing his livelihood as a fisherman, because the river has been overfished. Everywhere in the story there are references to death, and the language, both idiomatic and languid, paints a picture of a world slowly stifling and dying and being replaced by another.

*Hiroshima* is a haunting, brief story told from the perspective of eight-year-old Mayako, a young Japanese girl living in Hiroshima during World War II, on the eve of the dropping of the bomb. Mayako’s choppy, stream-of-consciousness narrative is so believable, her innocence of what is to come so



clear, that it fills the reader with dread, as we await the inevitable catastrophe.

In the title story of the collection, *The Boat*, we return again to Vietnam, and the impact of the war and its aftermath. *The Boat* is a horrifying and haunting story of fleeing refugees, crammed into an overcrowded boat, bound for Malaysia and freedom.

The protagonist, Mai, is a teenage girl, sent on the boat by her father, who had spent five years fighting the communists and two years at a re-education camp. The boat breaks down and drifts at sea for two weeks, with

dwindling supplies and no medicine, and the death toll rises daily.

Dead bodies, nothing but bundles of skin and bone, are thrown in to the shark-infested waters. The heat beats down unrelentingly, and there are overwhelming descriptions of people packed into heated holds reeking of urine and sickness, and of bodies blistering on deck in the unforgiving heat.

In her loneliness and despair, Mai forms an alliance with another woman as they try together to help a desperately ill child. Mai’s desperation throughout the journey is palpable; her attempts to cling to a semblance of what she knows, in a world suddenly and completely out of control, is heartbreaking.

After days on board the boat, Mai finally understands why her father, on his return from re-education camp, chose to live his life on the surface, never looking forward or inside.

“Because beneath the surface was either dread or delirium. As more and more bundles were thrown overboard she taught herself not to look — not to think of the bundles as human — she resisted the impulse to identify which families had been depleted. She seized distraction from the immediate things: the weather, the next swallow of water, the ever-forward draw of time.”

*The Boat* is perhaps the most difficult and heartbreaking story in this collection. Le portrays the psychological and physical tribulations of the refugees in searing detail, and the story is so vividly realised that it is impossible to shake the memory of Mai’s journey.

At a time when “boat people” are subject to scorn and rejection, this story is particularly relevant, and should be required reading for all policy makers and politicians who choose to demonise “boat people”.

*The Boat* is an often difficult and heart-breaking read, but it is most highly recommended. **R**