

12 Books from Vietnam recommended by Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai



Author
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"Growing up in the rural areas of Vietnam, I have personally witnessed how books can change lives, empower people and help them become compassionate global citizens. I am thrilled to work with Room to Read to help enhance equal access of children to books and educational opportunities so that no child will be left behind as we work together to build a more inclusive and just world."

This month, we connected with Room to Read Author Advocate Dr. Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai to learn about 12 books she recommends that are both written by Vietnamese authors and set within Vietnam, which are too rarely featured on the world stage.

1. **The Tale of Kiều** by Nguyễn Du, translated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông

Considered the masterpiece of Vietnamese literature, this long narrative poem from the early nineteenth century can be read in a bilingual edition with the Vietnamese and modern English translation side by side, including explanations of Vietnamese proverbs and folk sayings.

2. **The Defiant Muse: Vietnamese Feminist Poems** edited by Nguyễn Thị Minh Hà, Nguyễn Thị Thanh Bình, and Lady Borton

As diverse as Vietnam itself, this poetry anthology covers topics ranging from early Buddhist spirituals to the expulsion of the Chinese by the Trung sisters to the cultivation of silk worms to the thoughts of rebellious youth in Vietnam today.

3. **The Sorrow of War** by Bảo Ninh, translated by Phan Thanh Hào & Frank Palmos

Author and former soldier Bảo Ninh served with the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade of the Vietcong. Of the five hundred who went to war with the brigade in 1969, he is one of the ten who survived. His now classic novel is a widely acclaimed and honest portrayal of life in the North Vietnamese army.

4. **An Insignificant Family** by Dạ Ngân, translated by Rosemary Nguyễn

Called "the most important Vietnamese novel you've never read" by Saigoneer, this novel follows a woman writer and a revolutionary,

whose girlhood is spent as a guerrilla fighter, and whose post-war life becomes a search for personal liberation and individual love.

5. **The Stars, the Earth, the River: Short Stories** by Lê Minh Khuê, translated by Hoài Bắc Trần and Dana Sachs

In these 14 stories, a former war correspondent depicts a war-torn country and its reconstruction, examining the soul of a people whose culture has all but been destroyed, and asking the question: How can a culture honor the losses of war?

6. **The General Retires and Other Stories** by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, translated by Greg Lockhart

Offering unprecedented insight into a society trying to overcome and understand years of pain and civil strife, this collection caused a sensation in Vietnam when it first appeared in 1987.

7. **The Women on the Island** by Hồ Anh Thái, translated by Phan Thanh Hào, Celeste Bacchi, and Wayne Karlin

One of first novels focusing on women in post-war Vietnam shows how women who served during the war years returned to a society that they had defended, but that in many ways had no place for them.

8. **Ticket to Childhood** by Nguyễn Nhật Anh, translated by William Naythons

The story of a man looking back on his

life, this 2014 novel captures the texture of childhood in all its richness and explores children's "power to imagine the world differently."

9. **Diary of a Cricket** by Tô Hoài, illustrated by Tạ Huy Long, translated by Đặng Thê Bình

The most translated of all Vietnamese books (now in 40 languages), this is a story for all ages about a cricket's travels to discover the world, written when the author was only 17 years old.

10. **The First Journey** by Phùng Nguyễn Quang and Huỳnh Kim Liên

This richly illustrated and award-winning picture book set in the Mekong Delta is a story of resilience and determination that follows a young boy as he sets out alone in a little wooden boat.

11. **Open the Window, Eyes Closed** by Nguyễn Ngọc Thuần, translated by Trương Tiệp Trương

Compared to the beloved French classic, "The Little Prince", this is a children's book cherished by kids and grown-ups alike that treats difficult topics with style and compassion.

12. **The Women Carry River Water: Poems** by Nguyễn Quang Thiều, translated by the author and Martha Collins

Bilingual in format, this work is a collection of poems by a Vietnamese writer of the post-1975 generation. The poems are rooted in a culture that honors place and respect for landscapes of the past, present and future.

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