



Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey

G.B. Tran

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A superb new graphic memoir in which an inspired artist/storyteller reveals the road that brought his family to where they are today: Vietnamerica

GB Tran is a young Vietnamese American artist who grew up distant from (and largely indifferent to) his family's history. Born and raised in South Carolina as a son of immigrants, he knew that his parents had fled Vietnam during the fall of Saigon. But even as they struggled to adapt to life in America, they preferred to forget the past—and to focus on their children's future. It was only in his late twenties that GB began to learn their extraordinary story. When his last surviving grandparents die within months of each other, GB visits Vietnam for the first time and begins to learn the tragic history of his family, and of the homeland they left behind.

In this family saga played out in the shadow of history, GB uncovers the root of his father's remoteness and why his mother had remained in an often fractious marriage; why his grandfather had abandoned his own family to fight for the Viet Cong; why his grandmother had had an affair with a French soldier. GB learns that his parents had taken harrowing flight from Saigon during the final hours of the war not because they thought America was better but because they were afraid of what would happen if they stayed. They entered America—a foreign land they couldn't even imagine—where family connections dissolved and shared history was lost within a span of a single generation.

In telling his family's story, GB finds his own place in this saga of hardship and heroism. *Vietnamerica* is a visually stunning portrait of survival, escape, and reinvention—and of the gift of the American immigrants' dream, passed on to their children. *Vietnamerica* is an unforgettable story of family revelation and reconnection—and a new graphic-memoir classic.

Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey Details

Date : Published January 25th 2011 by Villard

ISBN : 9780345508720

Author : G.B. Tran

Format : Hardcover 281 pages

Genre : Sequential Art, Graphic Novels, Autobiography, Memoir, Comics, Nonfiction, History, War

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From Reader Review Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey for online ebook

Hestia Istiviani says

Found this book in my host apartment & read it in one sitting.

It's simply told the live of the author and how it affected his entire family. Yes, about the Vietnam War.

Since I read the book while I am in HCMC, it gets me curious to know more about Vietnam War but from both perspective. Should I?

Laura says

Review to come!

Greta says

RTC

Raina says

Really beautiful personal story about the creator's family's history in Vietnam. I haven't read many stories about what it was like to be a citizen of Vietnam during the war. Tran traces his family lineage, talking about his grandparents and his parents. The illustrations are just stunning and there's also a page or two of photographs of his family. He uses lots of different styles of panels, including some absolutely amazing full-pagers that you want to frame and put up in your house. One slight complaint I had was that he tells the story in a very nonlinear way, and it was a bit hard for me to keep track of which branch of the family he was talking about, what year we were in, etc. I think if I'd noticed the cast of characters on the end papers before I finished the book that would have helped, and maybe the author honestly didn't know the exact dates in many cases, but I had some trouble wayfinding. Also, because there were so many characters, I didn't feel connected to any one person at all. It didn't feel as personal as I'm sure it felt for Tran to create it. I didn't emotionally connect. But I admire the beauty and recognize this as an impressive, stunning piece in history, comics creation, and personal story building.

Some of the framing of the story is Tran's trips back to Vietnam as the only member of his family born in amerika. So I'm including it in my list of graphic novel travelogues. Really good, I'm probably bringing it home for my mom to read.

Jenny says

Vietamerica is a narrative exploration through which GB Tran works through his complicated family histories and it's his attempt to understand his enigmatic father and mother. Tran shows he was pretty much indifferent to his parent's story during his adolescence and this book was the impetus in his adulthood to map out that history and to maybe make up for his previous asshole-ness.

As a work of art, *Vietamerica* is amazing. The art is dynamic, inventive, varied, and the coloring sets the mood for the stories so well. Tran uses distinct illustration styles and colors for the various storylines and it's also really cinematic. The composition of the panels, full colored pages, family photos, pages mimicking the style of blocky propaganda posters, side by side faces, and even the all black pages are all so beautifully laid out and impeccably timed. I'd often turn a page and think "Wow, GB Tran just captured that moment completely." His metaphors are unlike anything I've ever seen (like the drawing of Vietnam as a half moon chasm that people are trying to claw out of or the page where GB is cleaning out a box of toy soldiers and it looks like harried people during the fall of Saigon).

Tran's characterization of his grandmothers was the most enjoyable for me. They were fighters! And there was so much intense emotion that was held quietly in check by so many people and that was kind of excruciating (in a good way). But despite this being a memoir, I still felt I didn't know GB Tran. He wasn't as fully characterized and I felt a lot of emotional distance from him. I don't know how he feels about it all and I'd kind of like to. Jing says male graphic novelists aren't as skilled at memoirs as female graphic novelists and I'm going to agree with her. Maybe their style is just different and they aren't as frank with their emotions.

I also got a little confused with the switching between the 2 family histories and the transitions between time periods and it took some time to figure out the family tree and how everyone was connected since there was remarrying, kids out of wedlock, step-kids and parents, etc.

I learned I need to read my Anne Sexton if I want confessional writing.

Sandy says

I am almost too emotional right now to write this review. This is because I am also a second-generation Vietnamese American who has been largely indifferent to my parents' history until recently. GB's family saga holds personal significance to me, because it brings into stark relief the generational and cultural divide that separates my own family. However, I believe that other readers without a similar background to the author will also be drawn to this visceral graphic memoir.

Tran's family journey jumps back and forth in time and place, spanning decades and continents. But the order in which he lays out the events feels familiar rather than confusing, as if you are there with him gathering the pieces to his family's story. You are swept back to his grandparents' and parents' daily lives, and begin to understand the causes and events leading up to the Vietnam War. Tran is a genius at capturing emotions and facial expressions in his illustrations. Every color, line, and layout brings the desperation and destruction of war, as well as the complexity of human connections (and disconnections) to life. This isn't just his family's story, but the story of every family around the world touched by war and political corruption.

I cried reading the final pages of this book, knowing that creating this book was a process of healing for GB Tran, and reading it has helped me on my own way to healing. *Vietnamerica* will give you a new perspective on the Vietnam War, being American, and what family really means. I borrowed this book from the library, but intend to purchase a copy. It is a story I must share with my family and our next generation.

Seth T. says

Easily one of the more interesting aspects of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (at least narratively speaking) is the interaction between the author's character and a past he knows little of. Spiegelman tries to understand his father's place in historical events from a place divorced locationally, culturally, and historically from the world in which his father formerly lived. In *Vietnamerica*, GB Tran unveils his own association with a family history of which he was almost entirely ignorant. His work seems to owe a substantial debt to Spiegelman, at the least in that Spiegelman prepared readers to engage in this kind of story. Yet while *Maus* primarily focuses its lens on the experiences of those who lived through Hitler's Germany, only sprinkling in occasionally Spiegelman's own reaction to the unfolding story, Tran's *Vietnamerica* nearly wallows in the author's journey from ignorance to enlightenment.

And does so greatly to the book's benefit.

In the book's opening pages, Tran's father chides the author for trying to judge things in Vietnam from a vantage of ignorance: "You can't look at our family in a vacuum and apply your myopic contemporary Western filter to them." In a way that Tran likely intended, the entirety of *Vietnamerica* can be read as an exploration of how to become liberated from such myopia through actively seeking revelation. Heartbreaking revelation, sure, but revelation like this, if it doesn't sour us completely on the human animal, can build us into the beautiful people we might be. Certainly the Tran who wrote *Vietnamerica* is a more careful human being than the Tran that exists on the page.

Vietnamerica features a host of people who are simultaneously sympathetic and unsympathetic. Tran himself comes off in his younger days as apathetic and neglectful, caring little for whatever lives his parents might have had before they become the monolithic individuals he seems to see them as while he is growing up. His father is gruff and unrelenting, stoical and stereotypically demanding. His mother is argumentative and embittered by an American dream that turns out to be just another hard life. And yet his mother not only has reason to have been disenchanted and reason to be upset with her husband, but Tran shows that she is not just the caricature he concocted of her in his early twenties; after all it is through her own careful, passionate, and invested narration that much of *Vietnamerica*'s story unfolds. His father, in the end, is so much more than the broad stereotype he seems to inhabit and Tran's investigation into the man's inner character (in part aided by his mother's narration) reveals, like the father suggests to the author earlier, that a one-sided perspective is inadequate for discovering who people are and what moves them. Even Tran himself does grow up—the publication of this beautiful book being primary evidence to his maturation.

Beyond just the reading, *Vietnamerica* is a joy to page through. The illustrations are well-composed and the

colours pitch perfectly with Tran's narrative chase across a fairly complex historical journey. I first encountered Tran in 2003 when I chanced upon the Xeric-awarded short-story *Content*. Not only was the story intriguing but his page compositions were inventive and well-designed. With *Vietnamerica* Tran continues to work to his strengths and the book has so many wonderful pages that any number are noteworthy representations of what a great creator can do with a page.

Despite the fact that, and I have said this a number of times over the years, I'm no great fan of memoir, sometimes authors can pull off something both interesting and worthwhile. GB Tran accomplishes these with *Vietnamerica*—the first by simply presenting an interesting story in interesting terms and the second by crafting something of a critique of the common Western gaze that is neither pedantic nor patronizing but, almost as if by accident, simply is. *Vietnamerica* is worth your time.

And it's probably unfair to say, what with the author having just finished such a major work, but really: I can't wait to read what Tran does next.

[Review courtesy of Good Ok Bad]

Forrest says

I connected with *Vietnamerica* on a couple of levels, emotionally.

First, my earliest recall-able memories are from my time spent as a child in the Philippines, at Clark Air Force Base, 1973-75. Take a careful look at those years - yep, I was there when South Vietnam fell to the Vietminh. I clearly remember driving past the flight-line to go with my mother to the commissary for groceries and seeing a pair of Chinooks landing. One sported a big white square with a red cross emblazoned on it. I saw the troops getting off of the helicopter - some of their faces were covered with bandages, others were being carried on stretchers, several used crutches. I asked Mom what was wrong with these men. All I remember of her reply was something like "they're hurt, honey. They're going home." It wasn't long before we watched on TV as overloaded helicopters dropped civilians off onto U.S. ships before ditching in the ocean because there was no room to land on the ships anymore. Of course, it was all very exciting - I was five years old at the time and didn't really have a clue what was going on.

Second, as a graduate student, I had the good fortune of being a teaching assistant for Dr. Al McCoy, Professor of Southeast Asian History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (Go Badgers!). I taught about 120 students in breakout sessions that were, students told me, the funnest part of the class. We had a great time with discussions that would probably be illegal post-911, like the exercise where I "armed" the students with 5; 500 lb HE bombs and a Piper Cub and had them plan how they would bring the city of Madison to its knees with only those five bombs. Yeah, I'd probably get arrested for teaching that now.

I'll be honest - my background in Southeast Asian history was extremely limited and my background in U.S. history was close to nil. But I did have a very good grasp on guerrilla warfare, insurgency, and counter-insurgency, especially in Africa (my MA was in African History), and a good grasp on the rise of nascent nationalism in the colonial state, so I got the gig with Al. I remember late nights furiously reading ahead of the students, brushing up on my own country's history, which I probably should have already known. Hey, it worked out okay.

But that lack of knowledge on US history was a bit of a shame to me. It still is, really. I had to work diligently to catch up and pass my students enough to be prepared for their inevitable questions. Thankfully Doctor McCoy was an excellent lecturer, possibly one of the best I've ever heard, and he did an outstanding job of covering those sections. He was always very understanding when I would come to him with dumb questions about U.S. history. In exchange, I supplied him with plenty of banter about our sometimes conflicting theories on insurgency and counter-insurgency, as well as a few shared anecdotes about the FBI, CIA (his realms of expertise) and the OSI (mine - but that's a story I can't tell you). All-in-all, it was wonderful.

That lack of knowledge of one's own history provides the driving force behind *Vietnamerica*, which is really a sort of confessional on the part of G.B. Tran. His parents - father and stepmother, actually, but that is an entire story within the story - fled Vietnam when Saigon fell, and he was born after they arrived in the U.S. When his grandfather and grandmother pass away, he reluctantly goes back to Vietnam with his parents, who haven't been there for 30 years.

This, I can relate to, in some smaller degree. As a military brat, I only saw my grandparents every couple of years or so. I never really knew my maternal grandfather as I would have liked, and only got to know my maternal grandmother when we lived with her for a year in 1979, when my dad was in cross-training and we couldn't live where he was at the time (though I suspect that Mom and Dad needed some time away from each other and were frankly in more debt than they cared to admit, so Mom and my brother and I stayed with Grandma - then again, I could just be inadvertently spreading false rumors). My paternal grandparents I got to know only when I moved out of my parents' place, while we were in England, and moved to Wyoming to live with them for a few months (an even longer story - you might read about it before I die, or not . . .).

Where I did not connect with Tran was with his resistance to wanting to go to Vietnam to connect with relatives he had never met. I've always been fiercely loyal about family, quirks, problems, dark closets, and all. I am very proud of my family name and my ancestry. People ask where "Aguirre" comes from and I have to respond "It's Basque". Some people have asked "You mean Spanish?". "No, I mean Basque. You never called Grandpa Spanish. He'd blow up your post office and police station if you did!" Then there's the inevitable "Do you speak Spanish?" No. I speak English, some German, and some Swahili. No Spanish. "Well you don't look Spanish." "That's because my dad was adopted." "That's sweet." "No, not really. Dad and my aunt, his twin, were both beaten black and blue and left for dead on the side of a highway in Wyoming by my biological Grandmother and her then boyfriend. Her husband was in prison at the time. My grandparents - MY Grandparents - picked my Dad and aunt up from the side of the road and took them into the police. Two weeks later, the state called them and explained that no one had claimed them and asked if they would like to adopt the twins. Grandma and Grandpa had been trying, unsuccessfully, to have children since their only child had died as an infant. So they adopted my father and my aunt. So, no it didn't start out sweet, but I guess it ended up that way."

These experiences of mine are what was evoked as I read *Vietnamerica*. It hit me on a deeply personal level. It will likely not have the same effect on you, though it might. If it does, I empathize, and I'm a touch sorry.

From a purely critical viewpoint, the book is a little emotionally distant, mainly because Tran himself is trying to put his parents' and his family's story at the forefront, rather than his own. It's a little difficult to connect with the author, to be honest, though he portrays his family history with honesty and sympathy. I just couldn't get into Tran's own head.

The artwork is merely good, but the cinematic structuring of the narrative is nearly perfect. Tran is a wonderful composer of the comic medium. The man should be writing storyboards for movies, then turning

them into animated films. I bet he'd be fantastic at it.

The story of the structure itself is a little choppy and it's difficult to follow, at times. Be sure to refer to the illustrated family tree that Tran provides - it's a lifesaver when you're feeling a bit lost.

And we all need a lifesaver, from time to time. Or several live's savers. So many stories. So many lives. So many saviors. It's really a wonder that any of us are alive to tell our tales at all. It really is.

Whitney says

Books like this certainly take a lot of courage to write and I was certainly impressed it it. In fact, I sat and read it all in one afternoon--not because the plot pulled me in, but because the intensity was so strong I knew I wouldn't be able to stop thinking about it if I did put it down.

There is no doubt that GB is an artist because he is able to provide the reader with important ideas without words. On the other hand, I had a very difficult time following it because it was all over the place; I was never sure who was talking and to what time period they were referring. The disjointed quality could have been on purpose as GB was piecing together his family's history, but I needed a little more continuity.

For a librarian, books like this are hard to shelf. At my library, it was in the YA graphic novel section but it is only suitable for some types of mature young adults. I would put this book on the shelf next to Persepolis because they are both telling in depth, intense stories in a graphic novel format. If it wasn't in a graphic novel format, it would definitely have been placed in the adult section, but many libraries lump all graphic novels together. I hope that more authors create such beautiful pieces of work so that we can begin creating an adult graphic novel section and this sort of book becomes more commonplace.

Guillermo Galvan says

I was very happy to find a comic book about Vietnam. Though I am too young to have had anything to do with the Vietnam war, I am fascinated by the era and its creative outlets, especially music and protest.

Vietnamerica is a memoir told from the perspective of G.B. Tran, a first-generation born son to parents who emigrated from war-torn Vietnam. In his adulthood, G.B.'s grandparents die, so he must accompany his parents to the funerals back in Vietnam. The reunion with his family and ancestral country is a major shock in terms of culture and his familial roots. Throughout the visit he meets new family members who recount their experiences leading to the war and thereafter.

The overall structure of the Vietnamerica is collection of mini-memories contained in a larger one, G.B.'s experience of reconnecting with his Vietnamese roots. Often G.B. will meet some new family member at their home, they'll have some sort of interaction till eventually the conversation steers towards his parents or grandparents during the war, and the story is given artistic focus. This process continues in a way so that the individual stories, told by different people, form a complete picture of what G.B.'s family went through. The only downside was that the supplementary stories would occasionally push G.B.'s story, the foundation for

the entire book, aside, which jumbled the flow of his experiences. Then again, it could just be a reflection of the chaos he experienced.

Vietnam is rich and complex. The illustrations of Vietnam effectively portray the tropical land of Vietnam. Somehow he is even able to show the sticky, exhaust-choked heat radiating all over the island. The characters have unique and interesting personalities that they clearly express in even moments of silence. G.B.'s father is perfect example of Vietnam's strong character design, who's presence immediately affects the tone whenever he walks into a room. Given that the story is concerned with the war, it is inevitable that some character whom the reader feels attached to will be killed or affected by murder.

It's difficult to pin down this book and say it is a memoir, political metaphor, or historical piece. The dynamic nature of this graphic novel defies any simple attempts at neatly categorizing it to a shelf, outside of "comic book" or "graphic novel." I, being a first-generation born Chicano, am especially pleased to finally see the experience of being born to immigrant parents given artistic expression by first-generation born writers/artists. It doesn't matter what culture the reader is from. Vietnam is a fulfilling read loaded with universal themes that anyone can identify with: family, generational gap, identity, etc. I look forward to seeing more work from G.B. and other writers who address the experience of growing up in an increasingly multi-cultural world.

P.S

I love Pho Soup. That stuff is delicious.

Elizabeth A says

Book blurb: In telling his family's story, GB finds his own place in this saga of hardship and heroism. Vietnam is a visually stunning portrait of survival, escape, and reinvention—and of the gift of the American immigrants' dream, passed on to their children.

This graphic memoir is simply fantastic. In some ways it's a typical immigrant story, and in other ways it is a story specific to Tran's family. This comic wonderfully explores themes of family, love, loss, war, immigration, and what is lost and what is gained when one raises kids in a different land with a different culture.

Most of us have read about or seen movies about the Vietnam War, but I find that global issues are best understood from a personal point of view. There is much I don't know about that war, and we had a different experience coming to the US, but as a fellow immigrant I very much related to this family's perspective. When we are younger we don't often care about family history or traditions. This is especially true for immigrant kids who have enough problems simply trying to fit in the culture they find themselves in.

Generations stop understanding each other, and so much is lost in these transitions. I appreciated the honesty in the telling of this rift. Too often, people die before a bridge can be built across this divide.

I also really loved the illustration style and poured over the line work on certain pages. This is one family's story told from both sides - Vietnam and America - and the title wonderfully captures this merging of lives and stories. There were some parts in the Vietnam sections that I didn't fully understand, which I attributed to my lack of knowledge, and while this is not an easy read, it's an important one.

Ken Ransom says

This isn't a linear narrative. G.B. Tran tells an inter-generational tale about how Vietnam's wars shaped his family. It starts in present-day Vietnam, then jumps between Tran's experiences growing up in America and different members of his family recounting their lives in Vietnam.

Tran juggles the points of view of his father, mother, siblings, uncle, and his grandparents.

The jumbled narrative can be a challenge and sometimes it's tough to follow the shifting narrators. If you get lost there is an illustrated family tree at the beginning of the book you can use for reference.

The book begins with Tran?—?the only member of his family to be born in America?—?visiting Vietnam with his parents. They return to pay their respects to Tran's maternal grandmother and paternal grandfather, who both died at almost the same time. This "family's journey" recounts their difficult choices that divided the family.

If you are a fan of comics or graphic novels this should be on your list of want-to-read. Even if you aren't a fan of the art, which in this case tells the story in a way that just words wouldn't, this is a book about the Vietnamese War worth reading.

krystal says

[WHEN THEY FLEE SAIGON AND THERE'S A FADE TO BLACK. (hide spoiler)]

Matthew says

I am beyond grateful that I came into contact with this book. I checked out many graphic novels that are supposedly critically acclaimed and yet I found them to be complete rubbish. Then I randomly picked this book up without knowing much information and right away I am drawn to this story thanks to the illustration. I do not know how many times I have found graphic novels to be phenomenal partly by having the best illustrations. I honestly believe if you have the best graphics then you already won half the battle for the reader.

Even though I am not Vietnamese I felt this story to be personal and too close to how much this book is

relatable to me. This book is the story of G.B. Tran who finally visits Vietnam with his parents and discover the whole story about how his parents met, how they left the country and the worst life experiences his parents and family had to suffer during the Vietnam War and after. While reading this book, the living conditions these people experience reminds me about Cuba where my family comes from and while not to the horrible extent this book showcases nonetheless the suffering is universal.

When I look back on how much my grandparents had to sacrifice to come to America, I will always be eternally grateful to them. They did not know any english, had only one relative to claim them to enter America, and how to support two children before they were even 30 years old. My grandparents didn't get the full extent of the horrors of a dictatorship but they got to see basic human rights throw out the window, all currency was forced to return to the government where they controlled how much you receive with new currency, and people suffering with less food to eat and not getting paid enough to support a family all in the name of a revolution.

With the Vietnamese experience the same situations but lack of medical care, free speech, thrown into labor camps and suffer countless death because intellectuals were a danger to society and the craziness of being brainwash for a peaceful government under communist rule. For G.B. Tran parents, they simply thought that they were going to flee for about a year to let the new government get settled and moved back into their old home but in the end they never went back and it took two decades before his parents could visit Vietnam.

I am not going to go into plot because it ruins the whole purpose of reading this book but just know that this book is not a happily ever after story. While we get exclusive insight into the authors life and his family, we get to see the backdrop of the Vietnam War through the eyes of the Vietnamese. I am incredibly shocked how uneducated I am when it comes to Vietnam because both of my parents lived through it. While no one in my family fought in the war, they were young enough to remember and seeing the horrors.

Through the course of the story, we keep hearing GB's parents or family member keep telling him that he does not understand what they went through during this moment of time and contradict themselves when they mention that they wanted their children to never grow up and experience these hardships. I can relate to GB because it wasn't until a few years ago that I got a grasp on how bad Cuba was and has become and the depths what an evil man did to an island. I remember growing up hearing Cuba this and Cuba that and being oblivious of it all.

I visited Cuba when I was little and I haven't returned since and not because I do not care for my family but I do not like to visit a place that feels like a 3rd world country, where food is scarce, and then knowing at the end of the day that I am returning somewhere that looks like paradise while they continue to suffer. GB experienced these same feelings and the only reason why he finally visited is because his parents asked him and he learned that he needed to know his families history before it is too late. I highly recommend this book to everyone and the illustrations are absolutely beautiful.

Here are some of photos on this marvelous book and I hope you could check it out and read it.

To see more reviews visit my blog at <http://dancinginth3dark.blogspot.com>

Deb says

I am a first generation Vietnamese born American. So throughout my life, I have heard snippets of the war from across the ocean. As far as I was concern, the Vietnam War was pretty much the only thing I knew about the motherland. My parents talked about it as if it was the only memory they had of their time in Vietnam. I remember trying to learn more about their life before their arduous journey to America, and them somehow talking with both anger and indifference. Even though they talked about the war quite frequently, at the same time, that period in their lives did not seem like it ever happened. It's as if war-time mom and dad were completely different people from present-day mom and dad. I would listen to the stories of their mysterious past, and imagine they are talking about strangers or even fictional characters. And to tell you the truth, I wasn't too keen about hearing of the war. Mainly because it was all I ever heard about when anyone talked about Vietnam. It was also because the subject was too disturbing to me. I didn't want to imagine the terrifying ordeals my family had to go through during that time. It's too damn upsetting.

Vietnamerica gave me a very clear picture of what it was like to live through that horrifying time. By reading about the story of one Vietnamese family, it is easy to understand that their story is probably very similar to thousands of other families as well. It was simultaneously enlightening and heartbreakening. The story is a bit confusing at first, but eventually finds its groove and becomes totally engrossing. The art work was fantastic and GB Tran was really able to illustrate the emotions that went into his own family's story. *Vietnamerica* is an incredible true story of loss, hope, heartbreak, family love, and the war that tears it apart. Highly recommended. 5 stars.
