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Uyen Nicole Duong

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Award-Winning Finalist in the Fiction: Multicultural category of the 2012 International Book Awards

Mimi (the protagonist of *Mimi and Her Mirror*) is a successful young Vietnamese immigrant practicing law in Washington, D.C. when the postcards begin to arrive. Postmarked from Thailand, each hand-drawn card is beautifully rendered and signed simply "Nam." Mimi doesn't recognize the name, but Nam obviously knows her well, spurring her to launch what will become a decade-long quest to find him. As her search progresses, long-repressed memories begin to bubble to the surface: her childhood in 1970s Vietnam in a small alley in pre-Communist Saigon. Back then, who was her best friend as well as her brother's playmate, and what did art have anything to do with the alleys of her childhood? What was the dream of these children then? What happened when these children were separated by the end of the Vietnam war, their lives diverged onto different paths: one to freedom and opportunity, the other to tragedy and pain? Now Mimi must uncover the mystery of the postcards, including what might have happened to the people who were less fortunate: those who escaped the ravaged homeland by boat after the fall of Saigon. When the mystery is solved, Mimi has to make a resolution: what can possibly reunite the children from the alley of her childhood even when the alley exists no more?

Postcards From Nam Details

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From Reader Review Postcards From Nam for online ebook

Sandra Osborn says

To me this was more of a short story than a novella. That said it was fascinating. I did listen on audible and I believe the reader hindered my enjoyment of this story.

Patricia says

This novella is about Mimi, a young vietnamese woman who fled to America from Vietnam with her family right before the fall of Saigon. About 10 years after she has assimilated and become a lawyer, she begins receiving hand drawn postcards signed by someone named Nam. The story unfolds as she discovers who Nam is and the connection to her past life in Vietnam.

I'm not sure if I liked this book. I thought it ended a bit abruptly and a little too "artistically" for my taste. I read the afterword and found that this was originally a full novel but it was slimmed down to a novella. Based on the author's writing style, that may have been a good thing, but they may also have edited out some things that would have left me a little more satisfied with how the story developed. So, I didn't hate the book, but I didn't love it either.

Anne says

I chose this book from the Amazon Vine newsletter, the premise of the story really appealed to me, and I've not read many novels set around Vietnam before - so was interested to learn a little more. This is a novella really at just 100 pages long, but every one of the pages contain words that really touch the heart.

Mimi is a succesful lawyer based in America, she is a Vietnamese immigrant who has americanised both her name and her lifestyle. Mimi's family were lucky enough to be able to leave their home in South Vietnam just before the North took over. Other family members and friends were not so lucky though, and Mimi has distanced herself from the memories of her past. Then, out of the blue, postcards begin to arrive. Beautifully, hand drawn postcards that are personal to Mimi, and to her past. Who is sending them, and why? What do they mean?

After speaking with her family, it becomes clear to Mimi that these cards are being sent by Nam. Nam was a childhood neighbour back in Vietnam and Mimi has heard nothing from him for years. Determined to find out more about the cards and about Nam, Mimi tracks down refugees and learns through them, of Nam's ordeals over the past years. He has suffered dreadfully, yet still he remembers her.

There are some haunting passages in this short novel, the terrors suffered by Nam over the years are harsh, yet his love for Mimi never dies and his art work iives on.

This is a beautifully crafted story.

DubaiReader says

Short but to the point.

Although this novella was only 90 pages long, it delivered quite a punch. With a slow start describing Mimi's life as a lawyer in America, the book opens out to describe her past as a child in Saigon before it fell to the Communist North, and the difficulties of escaping from the country.

Mimi's escape was traumatic enough and she was devastated to leave a much beloved grandmother. But many were even less fortunate and suffered as the 'boat people' that we heard so much about on the news at the time. With storms, pirates and often refusal on their eventual arrival, this was an hugely risky way to escape.

The postcards of the title arrived from Thailand without return addresses, signed 'Nam'. At first Mimi could not fathom who they could be from, but when she finally realises the identity of Nam she is forced to remember suppressed memories from her childhood.

Mimi interviews several survivors, to relate a piece of history that has probably slipped from many memories.

Although this is the third of a trilogy, I did not feel I should have read the other books first. Having read Postcards From Nam, however, I would very much like to read the previous 2 books.

Written in a slightly awkward style, I would still recommend this for its powerful content.

For an alternative read based in Vietnam, I would also suggest The Man From Saigon by Marti Leimbach.

Kimmy says

I read this like 2 years ago and still feel emotions that this book evoked. Wonderful read.

Lori says

A woman who was born in Vietnam during the war years. She leaves as a child in 1975 to the USA. this is about the homemade postcards she receives from Nam a childhood friend. one day the postcards stop for years than starts up again. then stops again she now wonders what happened to her friend. she goes to Vietnam as an adult to try and find out what happened to Nam. Pretty good for the most part.

Sara says

This was a poignant story and held my interest even though the method of narration was unusual and rather poetic. We become quite involved in Nam's fate, even though he never speaks and we see him only through the eyes of the narrator Mimi and through reports of the horrific experiences he has undergone in getting out of Vietnam in the 70s. This is the last in a series of 3 novels and I wish I had read the other two before this one - but this does stand on its own. Mimi is an upwardly mobile immigrant lawyer who realizes that she has left her human side and her childhood behind her in Vietnam...and has the courage to get out of the rat race and look within herself to reconnect with her beginning.

Amanda says

This novella is an extremely quick read (afternoon at the pool + bedtime) that packs a powerful story, beautifully written. It did leave me wanting to learn more about MiMi and Nam's story, but as it was presented, it is a deeply personal and raw story of the Vietnamese experience around the war.

Janice says

This is a very compelling novella that I read in one day. I did not know initially that it was part of a three book series. I liked it so much I just downloaded the other two and I'm looking forward to reading them. I was an adolescent when the Vietnam war was raging. I had/have absolutely no knowledge of the actual culture of Vietnam. I really enjoyed learning about what it was like for the "boat people" through this book. It was a real education into an area that I had so little knowledge of. Of course, this isn't the gist of the book. The story itself is a fascinating journey. How immigrants can live their dreams in America resonates with my own family history. But the childhood nightmares of the immigrants are never buried far enough under the surface to stay hidden. The author takes on that journey too!

Sue says

I find myself somewhat disappointed as I write this review. I am old enough to remember the video of South Vietnamese attempting to breach the American embassy to escape the oncoming North Vietnamese army, the lines of people snaking to the embassy roof to climb on to the final helicopters. It was a horrible time for those who remained in the South.

In her novella, Uyen Nicole Duong writes of a woman turning 40 who emigrated from Viet Nam after that fall of Saigon in 1975. This woman has a CV remarkably like the author's but we are told this is not a memoir. Instead it becomes a somewhat tortured reminiscence of childhood, a friendship lost and resurrected by the titular postcards. This childhood friend, Nam, did not leave Vietnam when Mimi did but escaped later and had a torturous trip to "freedom".

I am not going to discuss all the plot points here. I don't like to reveal all though all becomes obvious fairly early in this short book. One of my major concerns is stylistic. The narrative is frequently written in almost poetic style but here it does not serve well. It tends to appear overwrought or overworked instead of well thought out and appropriately emotional.

One final thought. Could the author have intended Nam to be an idea or, in fact, her birth country, not a person? I ask because I recall a time when that country was frequently known as Nam. In fact, when I first saw this book, that is what I thought the title meant, PostCards from Vietnam.

Rating 2.5 or 3

Mike says

Postcards from Nam

I forgot that I was reading a work of fiction until I finished *Postcards from Nam*. Until that time, I thought I was reading a memoir. The curious thing is that as a memoir, I would have given the book three stars, but as a novel, a novella, really, only two stars. That got me to thinking. Why would I find more merit to a book as a memoir than a novel? Considerable reflection on this question has led me to conclude that the answer lies in the fact that the novelist has a different purpose than the writer of memoirs. There is more to writing a novel than merely creating a series of events, even interesting and historically significant events.

Twenty five years ago, Mi Chau, now an attorney about to turn 40 years old, was airlifted out of Vietnam just before the fall of Saigon. In the ensuing years, she periodically received hand drawn postcards from Thailand, signed only by "Nam." Improbably, until reminded by her mother, she had forgotten that Nam was her next door neighbor in Saigon who had a crush on her and promised to take care of her. Mi Chau becomes determined to find out what happened to Nam after she left Saigon. She learns that Nam left Vietnam on a refugee boat headed for Singapore, but it was intercepted by pirates. Nam was brutally raped and left for dead, only to be saved by a kind hearted buddhist fisherman. Somehow, Nam ended up as a male sex entertainer in Thailand. The short novel ends with Mi Chau composing a letter to Nam. Interspersed are short vignettes of different characters from Mi Chau's life and second hand accounts of Nam's travails after the war.

The experiences of Vietnamese refugees after the war are certainly worth telling, and the author was clearly immersed in those experiences and brings the period to life. This is the stuff of which powerful memoirs are written. But more than being a witness to historically significant events is needed for a successful novel. As interesting as some of the scenes are and as skillful as the writer is with the language, the book just doesn't quite deliver as a novel. If I were the author's editor, I would have had her rewrite the ending. Indeed, I would have had her provide the story with an ending, because it really doesn't have one.

A note about my grading system. I rate books within their genres, as there is no point in comparing a self help book to a book of poems or a work of history. This is true within genres, and a four star for a detective novel is not the same as a four star for a work of serious fiction. Very few books rate five stars, which are reserved for masterpieces or near masterpieces, within their genre. On the theory that one should not read bad books, and therefore differentiating between bad, worse and really horrible is a waste of time, one star means simply not worth reading, period. Two, three and four stars all indicate that the book is readable, and one might think of them as meaning "a book with some merit," "a good, solid book," and "a very good book" respectively.

Eric says

An intriguing premise -- a Vietnamese woman living in America gets mysterious postcards from a figure from her troubled past -- that was beautifully written, but ultimately fell short because of an ending that left much to be desired. But, focusing on the positive, here are two quick examples of the writing that illustrate the author's talent:

- "It was I who found her on the floor in a pond of blood."
- "I held Nam's postcards in my two hands, shaking and crying until I felt dehydrated."

Tamika says

"Almond eyes". I grew tired of that descriptor in this short novel by Duong. Its abrupt end was a frustration, in that I wanted to understand how simply telling Nam's story was enough for Mimi. Upon reading the Postscript, though, I learned that this is the third and final installment of a series. Perhaps investing time in the prequels will help me enjoy Postcards From Nam more than I did.

Byron Edgington says

Here we have a fictionalized account of a young Vietnamese woman's intriguing interaction with a childhood friend, a fellow who sends her postcards. The cards seem to arrive in her mailbox at random, despite the fact that 'Mimi' has only a vague recollection of who this 'Nam' is, or how he knows her address. This very short novel quickly becomes metaphor for American involvement in the War in Vietnam many years ago, and its lingering hold on American consciousness. Ms Duong is a brilliant writer, whose family arrived from Vietnam and made a life for themselves in this country. So her Mimi character has reason to look back with mixed feelings to the land her family left behind. These Postcards from 'Nam,' which is not only the sender's name but the Vietnamese word for 'South,' evoke those memories, forcing Mimi to dredge up childhood memories as well.

Full disclosure, as a military veteran of the war in Vietnam, my initial attraction to this little book was in thinking it was truly 'postcards from Vietnam.' It is not. Yet it is. But it isn't. Thus the conundrum of Westerners dealing with Eastern thought, Eastern ways and indeed one of the obstacles America faced in the war we failed to win in that small country.

Ms Duong writes very well, unfortunately, by the end of the book we know far more about Nam than we know about Mimi. We read about her mother, various Vietnamese operatives who escaped Vietnam after April 1975 and fellow employees in Houston. But we never quite get a sense of who this young Harvard trained Vietnamese woman is, what drives her, what she fears, and what or who she loves. Indeed, why do Nam and his postcards resonate with her so?

Byron Edgington, author of *The Sky Behind Me: A Memoir of Flying & Life*

J. says

Postcards from Nam, the new novella by Uyen Nicole Duong, is a gem, like the shard of a pearl found in the white sand, a rare find.

Just prior to the fall of Saigon, Mi Chau, age eleven, flees Vietnam with her parents to America, abandoning her aristocratic grandmother to the Communist regime.

Once in America, Mi Chau sets about creating her new life, assuming the name Mimi. She leaves behind the horrors of her flight, imposing upon herself a sort of amnesia about her youth. She attends Harvard and becomes a lawyer in the nation's capitol.

And then one day the postcards from Thailand start to arrive.

Each postcard is hand drawn with images of the Vietnamese culture, a life Mimi has forgotten, accompanied

by a few lines written to Mi Chau and signed, simply, Nam. Confessions of regret, that the author was unable to protect Mi Chau's grandmother, as he promised her he would. Others profess of his longing to protect Mi Chau, to take care of her.

Slowly, with help from her mother, Mimi begins to remember.

Nam was the young boy who lived nearby to Mi Chau, who always listened to her practicing Beethoven's Für Elise on the piano, telling her she played beautifully; who knew of her love of honeyed toasts and always brought her a basket of them as a token of his devotion and adoration.

And so Mimi sets about reconstructing the past, on a mission to learn Nam's story. Like a jigsaw puzzle, Mimi fits the pieces together, from Nam's own family (now relocated to America), from a lawyer friend with contacts in Thailand, and from the old man who piloted the boat on which Nam sailed into exile. She learns of his flight from Saigon at age fifteen, his heroism in saving his younger brother while on the boat, the savagery he endured at the hands of pirates, the life he chose in Bangkok--the stone he fruitlessly pushes uphill--and finally, when the postcards stop, his relocation to Australia to enter the priesthood. Ms. Duong does a marvelous job depicting the tragic Nam through the few forlorn words he writes to Mi Chau on his postcards.

Postcards is a heart wrenching story of tragic, unfulfilled love; but it also so much more--that shard of a broken pearl beautiful in its own right. At times told with frank detachment, other times with honest sincerity, it is truly a rare find.
