

## Lifestyle | Features

LITERARY STAR VIET THANH NGUYEN  
ON THE ROOTS OF IDENTITY POLITICS

By offering up a new perspective on US and French imperialism, Viet Thanh Nguyen has become a literary star. But the Pulitzer-winning author insists that reducing everything to identity politics misses the point about the horrors of the past, and how to move forward. "I'm often called a Vietnamese-American writer, which I don't have a problem with," Nguyen told AFP. "But I do have a problem with it when other writers are just called 'writers'."

"My books are not only speaking about Vietnamese issues. They are speaking about France, the US, and global issues like colonialism, racism and imperialism." Nguyen won international acclaim for his million-selling 2015 novel "The Sympathizer" about a half-Vietnamese, half-French double agent during the Vietnam War, who later remains embedded among exiles in the



In this file photo US novelist, 2016 Pulitzer prize winner for Fiction, vietnamese-born Viet Thanh Nguyen poses during a photo session. —AFP

United States. He has followed it with a sequel, "The Committed", which follows the same character to France where he confronts discrimination and his own guilt over the violence in his past.

"The identity crises in France and the

US are only symptoms, and if we focus on symptoms we don't understand the actual problems," Nguyen said. "We wouldn't have these identity crises if it hadn't been for colonization and conquest that brought these people to these countries."

#### 'Painful memories'

Nguyen was speaking to AFP ahead of the release of the French translation of "The Committed". The novels have particular resonance in France—the former colonial power in Vietnam, and a nation that has often seemed reluctant to question its imperial past. "The French still have a really hard time dealing with not only the Algerian past but the Indo-Chinese past," Nguyen said. He is sympathetic to these historical blind spots, however—having suffered some of his own. Born in Vietnam, Nguyen

arrived in the US at the age of five.

He remembers little of his native country or the war, though the memory of being separated from his parents when he arrived at a refugee center in the US has stayed with him. "Sometimes painful memories can scar you forever," he said. Nguyen blanked out his experience in the refugee camp for many years—"as a survival mechanism". "I'm fully aware that memory is very unreliable whether we're talking about personal or national memory, and every nation is deeply reluctant to recognise the crimes it has committed in the past."

#### Doomed approaches

Growing up in California, Nguyen found refuge in books and his own tentative steps at writing, though literature could also be a dangerous pastime. "As a very precocious young reader, I would

venture outside the children's section—for instance reading books about the Vietnam War by American soldiers where the Vietnamese were depicted very negatively." Those painful early encounters fuelled his later studies, and he has ended up specializing in post-colonial memory at the University of Southern California.

France's official approach to race is often contrasted with the US-promoting the idea of universal liberal values rather than multi-culturalism. For Nguyen, both systems are lacking. "The French and American systems are doomed because they are both racist in their own way," he said. "They cannot solve the problems unless they are able to address their history of slavery and colonialism." —AFP

## Australian man, 60, uses pocket knife to fight off crocodile

northern Cape York Peninsula. "There was a struggle and he fortunately escaped the grip of a four to four-and-a-half-meter crocodile. The odds of doing that are about zero," said the Queensland state environment department's Matt Brien. The man had gone fishing on his property last week near Hope Vale, about five hours' drive from Cairns, and he shooed away a bull from the riverbank so he could take over the spot. Then, the crocodile struck.

lost the tug-of-war and was pulled in. "The man said that as he entered the water, he managed to retrieve his knife from his belt and stabbed the crocodile in its head until it let him go."

The man then scrambled up the bank to escape the predator. After emergency treatment at Cooktown Hospital, he was later flown to Cairns Hospital where he was still recovering a week later. A health department spokeswoman said he was in a "stable" condition.

#### 'It lunged at him'

"He described seeing the crocodile seconds before it lunged at him, knocking him over as he was about to cast his fishing rod," the department said in a statement. He grabbed onto the branch of a mangrove tree in a desperate attempt to stay out of the river as the crocodile's jaws clamped around his boots. But he quickly

#### 'Harrowing experience'

Wildlife officers who interviewed the man Tuesday confirmed that his injuries were consistent with a crocodile attack. "It appears that the crocodile was targeting the bull or the cow at the time, and he's just ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time," Brien told reporters. "It's an absolutely harrowing experience. He won't forget that in a long time." Brien said the man had been left "quite traumatized" by the incident, adding he would need "time for healing, both mentally and physically".

Saltwater crocodile numbers have exploded in Australia's "croc country" since they were declared a protected species in 1971, with attacks increasing in recent years. The "salties", which can grow up to seven meters long and weigh more than a ton, are a common feature of the vast continent's tropical north. Fatalities remain relatively rare, with locals and visitors warned to keep their distance from crocodile-inhabited waterways. — AFP

A 60-year-old Australian man escaped the jaws of a large crocodile by stabbing it repeatedly in the head with his pocket knife as it dragged him into a river, local authorities said yesterday. Wildlife officers said the man was "lucky to be alive" after the terrifying attack at a remote riverbank in Australia's far



A person walks past Alberto Giacometti's 'Le Nez', part of The Macklowe Collection, at Sotheby's in New York City. — AFP

## Art worth more than \$200m sold on first night of New York fall auctions

Christie's first in-person auction in New York since the pandemic began netted more than \$200 million on Tuesday night, with paintings by Basquiat and Banksy going under the hammer. In a sign of the vitality of the current art market, all forty lots found a buyer in the '21st Century' sale at the Christie's auction room in the Rockefeller Center, which was open to the public for the first time since March 2020.

But it took place in a hybrid format, where it was possible to bid physically from New York or connected real-time bidding rooms in London and Hong Kong, as well as online. The auction's total sales were \$219 million, with bidders registered from 27 countries, Christie's said. The most anticipated piece was "Guilt of Gold Teeth" by Jean-Michel Basquiat, a 1982 painting on a large-scale canvas that went for \$40 million. The piece "depicts Baron Samedi, a spirit of Haitian

Vodou and leader of the Gede" and was "created at the peak of the artist's career," the auction house said. "Flash in Naples", another piece by the New York artist who died aged 27 in 1988, sold for over \$19.8 million, exceeding its high estimate.

Scotsman Peter Doig's 1990 painting "Swamped" sold for more than \$39.8 million, a record for the artist. Two paintings by British street artist Banksy, "Sunflowers from Petrol Station" and "Monkey Detonator", sold for \$14.5 million and \$2.19 million respectively. "HUMAN ONE", the first hybrid physical and digital work by American artist Beeple, the holder of the record sale of an NFT (non-fungible token), sold for over \$28.9 million. Ten artists set new records for their top auction bids on Tuesday, while the sale of lots from 20th-century artists is slated for today.



This picture shows a worker inspecting a sample can of cat food, its base ingredient made out of silkworm pupae, at a pet food factory in Miaoli. — AFP photos



This picture shows resident felines being fed with canned cat food containing silkworm pupae as its main ingredient at the Mao Thai Thai cat cafe in New Taipei City.



This picture shows silkworms feeding on mulberry leaves at a silkworm farm in Miaoli.

## Silkworm cat grub smells like success

Licking its lips imperiously, a ginger cat mops up every last morsel of food from its curly whiskers, clearly undaunted by its supper's rather unusual base ingredient—silkworm pupae. The 15 feline res-

idents of the Mao Thai Thai cat cafe in Taiwan are among volunteer taste testers sampling a new cat food developed by silkworm experts. As well as making use of what was previously just a byproduct of silk production, the scientists say the food eliminates harmful intestinal bacteria—with the added bonus of reducing the odor of the cats' own byproducts.

"They have more energy and less smelly faeces, which is more than I expected," says the cafe's manager Rosa Su. The food comes in various normal-sounding flavors—tuna and milkfish, beef and chicken—but the main protein component of the pink glop is insect. That doesn't seem to bother Su's cats, who clamor around her,

impatient for their dinner. The research team says much of the feedback from other owners involved in the trial has been positive too.

#### More than just fabric

At the century-old Miaoli Agricultural Research and Extension Station, where the food was created, hundreds of caterpillars wriggle around in trays as they munch on mulberry leaves. The facility houses 136 different silkworm varieties from all over the world. The pupa is the intermediate stage in their lifecycles, when they form cocoons to transition from larva to adult. "When we see silkworms, we think of silk fabrics," researcher Liao Chiu-hsun tells AFP as she carefully slices the top off a silk

cocoon to extract a squirming brown grub. "But these highly domesticated insects have a lot more to offer."

The pupae are already rich in protein, fat and minerals, but the Miaoli team has also developed a technique to boost their content of immune proteins that kill harmful bacteria inside the host. Stressing the silkworms and making them think they are in danger means they produce more of these proteins in the cocoon, after which they are harvested and turned into cat food.

#### Lucrative gloop

This innovative use of what was previously mainly a waste product could also be a potential lifeline for Taiwan's last remaining silkworm farmers. They once numbered in the hundreds, but nowadays only two are still in business. Hsu Wei-chun, 30, a third-generation farmer, says it is no longer economically feasible to cultivate the insects for fabric alone. Mulberry leaves are already used to make tea, for example, and cocoons can be used in cosmetics.

"Our competitiveness comes from the ability to use everything," Hsu explains. "We make use of every portion to keep costs down." The pet food market in Taiwan presents a lucrative opportunity—animal ownership is on the rise, and the economy around it is valued at more than US\$1 billion. A can of the silkworm cat food sells for NT\$68 (US\$2.43), a little more than average canned wet food.

"Even though it's a bit more expensive... I feel the acceptance level for sustainable and eco-friendly canned

(pet) food is quite high in Taiwan," says Lee Wei-ting, department head of Cultural Creativity and Digital Marketing at National United University. And pet stores in Korea, Japan, Thailand and the United States have already expressed interest in the product as well. The CEO of the company that



A resident cat looking on at the Mao Thai Thai cat cafe in New Taipei City.

started mass producing the new food a month ago says the response has been overwhelming. "I feel pet owners nowadays are more focused on ingredients," says Eva Liu. "We used crowd funding in the beginning as a pre-sale. On the first day, within 24 hours we reached our preliminary goal." — AFP



This picture shows a worker laying out mulberry leaves for silkworms to feed on at a silkworm farm in Miaoli.



This picture shows customers at the Mao Thai Thai cat cafe in New Taipei City.