

The Family Wound

BY NGOC QUANG HUYNH

STARBORN BOOKS (WALES, UK), 2004
232 PAGES. PAPERBACK ISBN 1-899530-17-7

PUBLISHER WEB SITE: WWW.STARBORNBOOKS.CO.UK

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The *Family Wound* is a first novel by Ngoc Quang Huynh, whose memoir *South Wind Changing* (1994) chronicles his childhood years in South Vietnam, growing up during the war in a large family, his brief time at university, his imprisonment in a forced labor camp, and his final escape to America as a refugee. In *The Family Wound* Huynh turns his attention to fiction, yet the story he tells is centered around the Vietnamese War and the devastating effects it had on the Vietnamese themselves. While a number of books on the war experience (fictional and otherwise) have been written by Americans, few detail the war's irreparable effects from the perspective of an insider.

In this, *The Family Wound* is different, and in fact does provide a perspective quite free of the battle bravado and existential anguish of those (young Americans) sent to fight someone else's war for reasons often unclear to them. In simple and at times powerful language, the author presents an ancient agrarian society and its people inexplicably ripped apart in a conflict they didn't choose and had little chance to escape. But *The Family Wound* is essentially a love story, or more accurately, the story of a love that survived the long separation caused by the war, yet which could never fully overcome that separation. In a sense Huynh's novel is a paean for those who survived the war, in whatever way, and in whatever condition, and also a meditation on what might have been had the war not so brutally and irrevocably changed the lives of so many Vietnamese.

The Family Wound, suitable for use at high school and university levels in classes dealing with multiculturalism and/or Asian literature, does contain graphic war scenes that will need to be properly contextualized at all level of instruction. A particularly interesting approach might, for instance, be to read Huynh's novel alongside a Vietnam-related novel or narrative by an American who fought in Indochina, comparing the two works in terms of tone, voice, narrative perspective, focus, and overall message. One valuable aspect of Huynh's book is his judicious use of italicized Vietnamese terms, which lends an air of authenticity to the story, and gives the reader a taste of the sound and rhythm of the Vietnamese language that few American-written pieces provide. There is a glossary at the end of the volume to define the Vietnamese terms. All in all, *The Family Wound* is a good read, and a worthy and informative look into the Vietnam War as the Vietnamese themselves experienced it. ■

HOWARD GISKIN is Professor of English at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. He has edited a collection of Chinese folktales, co-edited *An Introduction to Chinese Culture through the Family*, and published articles on Chinese folk literature. His interests include East Asian literature and culture, and he teaches courses in World Literature in translation.



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