



A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain

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Robert Olen Butler's lyrical and poignant collection of stories about the aftermath of the Vietnam War and its impact on the Vietnamese was acclaimed by critics across the nation and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993.

Now Grove Press is proud to reissue this contemporary classic by one of America's most important living writers, in a new edition of 'A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain' that includes two subsequently published stories -- "Salem" and "Missing" -- that brilliantly complete the collection's narrative journey, returning to the jungles of Vietnam.

A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain Details

Date : Published April 5th 2001 by Grove Press (first published 1992)

ISBN : 9780802137982

Author : Robert Olen Butler

Format : Paperback 269 pages

Genre : Fiction, Short Stories

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From Reader Review A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain for online ebook

Fabian says

Exemplary short story collection! Have not been moved this way since Jhumpa Lahiri's (also Pulitzer-winning) "Interpreter of Maladies."

CANNOT POSSIBLY be MISSED by any serious student of the Short Story or modern American literature. A late night top-notch Scotch...

Johnplavelle says

In THE THINGS THEY CARRIED by Tim O'Brien he has a short story about the young enemy soldier that he killed by throwing a hand grenade at him. In Olen Butler's A GOOD SCENT FROM A STRANGE MOUNTAIN, there is "Salem" the short story of a Vietnamese soldier that keeps a pack of Salem cigarettes that he recovered from a dead American soldier that he had killed. He is troubled because the government wants him to return all of the items that could be used to identify the dead Americans. Ho Chi Minh smoked Salems and he wants to keep them as a shrine. The stories should be read together. The Man I Killed is the focus of these two stories, there are people out there in these wars and when these two men focus on that. War becomes a different thing for both of them.

Tyler Jones says

Back in my book selling days, Robert Olen Butler's Tabloid Dreams was, shortly after it came out, THE book all the cool kids working in bookstores were recommending to anyone who cared for a recommendation from a kid in a bookstore. I got caught up in the Tabloid Dreams hysteria that gripped my circle of co-workers for three weeks back in 1996, forcing countless unsuspecting Calgarians to buy the collection of short stories. What's that Ma'am? You like Maeve Binchy? Why then you will adore Tabloid Dreams! Looking for a book to help you pass the Canadian securities course? Tabloid Dreams! Then, couple of years later, I clandestinely read his earlier short story collection, Good Scent From a Strange Mountain. Only now, after fourteen years, do I dare admit it - Good scent is a better book.

This book is all killer, no filler. After each story you read, you will say to yourself "that is one of the best stories I've ever read" - and the next story will be better.

Butler served two years in Vietnam, both as a counter-intelligence special agent and as an interpreter. This background gave him a unique perspective into the hearts and minds (as they say) of the Vietnamese, which coupled with his extraordinary imagination helped to produce this amazing book. Almost all the stories are told from a Vietnamese person's point-of-view and most are told post war. Many explore the refugee experience in America. But here the similarities end, as Butler explores distinctly different personalities, values and dreams in each story.

Less gimmicky and more true than Tabloid Dreams - and I still think Tabloid Dreams is an awesome book.

Kenton Yee says

Robert Olen Butler inhabits his POV characters so masterfully that there are no weak stories in this collection. Indeed, each of these stories is another example of how to structure and present a short story. The progression of point-of-view characters, from hookers and strippers to Americanized middle-class Vietnamese immigrants in Louisiana to the white American deserter assimilated in a rural Vietnamese village, works well together and immerses us in a reading experience that exceeds the sum of the individual stories. I am still pondering "The American Couple" (the longest and most ambitious of the stories) and how it's a metaphor for the story of Vietnamese-American relations--and potentially a warning to America about getting sucked into Middle East and other conflicts in the future. With Robert Olen Butler's ability to inhabit characters and channel their voices, I wish that he would show us more Vietnamese-Americans than just the hooker-stripper husband-seeker former-military-officer-turn-businessman fisherman restaurateur and still-fervently-Vietnamese demographic. (About 3/4 way through the book, the Vietnamese accent started to feel stereotypical and suffocating.) What about the elite immigrants? The rebellious artists? The fraction who did not become cliches?

Emily says

I think white people need to stop telling non-white peoples' stories. It just reeks of uncomfortable colonialism. The short story where Butler writes his character as a cheap, two-bit Vietnamese hooker with the awkward stereotypical English one might expect from a recent war victim is just too pathetic for me to swallow. Some nice sentences here and there, but generally a flop.

Scott Axsom says

First let me say, "Damn you Robert Olen Butler. Damn you to hell." Because now any book I pick up next can only pale by comparison to this exquisitely beautiful story collection. *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* is a Pulitzer-winning compilation of stories primarily about the Vietnamese diaspora, with the majority of the stories written from the perspective of immigrants living in and around New Orleans.

I am at a loss to adequately describe the poignance of Butler's prose in this collection. The only thing I can remotely compare it to, in terms of soul-rocking beauty, would be the polemical chapters from *The Grapes of Wrath*. Butler does a brilliant job of describing the world through the eyes of a wide array of personalities but where he really shines is in his descriptions of the sensory aspects of this world, serving as analogs for the desires, hopes and regrets of the remarkably believable characters he's created.

In a sense, that's just good writing but Butler can take a description and charge it with such emotion that the whole thing begins to soar and I found myself often transported by his prose. He writes about both the minutiae of daily life and the extremely wrought issues of life and death with such power and clarity that I regularly felt (occasionally with an almost embarrassing sense of intrusion) I was viewing the souls of his characters. He is, without question, a writer with the courage to lay bare his heart.

This is such a varied collection that it's difficult to go much further other than to say there are a couple of

stories in here that are the most beautiful things I've ever read - specifically the book's title story as well as the collection's penultimate story, "Salem" and its final story, "Missing". That said, there are a couple of stories that didn't quite do it for me and one in particular ("The American Couple") for which I can contrive no explanation for why it's in here. But the bottom line is this: Find yourself a quiet place, then take this book and prepare yourself for a ravishing read. Bravo, Robert Olen Butler. Oh, and damn you to hell.

Christie says

I feel bad giving this book only one star since it won the Pulitzer, but I did not like this book at all. It's a collection of short stories about Vietnamese immigrants in America. The dust jacket promised "lyrical" but delivered "short and choppy" instead. The stories could be revealing about the Vietnamese immigrant's experience in America, but the writing style is off-putting and frankly, doesn't make much sense to me. Even if the stories are from a Vietnamese person's point of view, and even if they don't speak English well, they wouldn't THINK in choppy sentences, would they?

Mmars says

I'm really torn over whether this book deserved a Pulitzer for several reasons. First, several of these stories are stunning and do what great short stories do. They set you up and spin you through a slice of life at a discombobulating pace then leave you pinned at some unanticipated place. Like playing pin the tail on the donkey. However, I found one or two to be good, but not great. Thus four stars....(the expectations are high for a Pulitzer Prize winner.)

The stories were interesting and fueled by quiet introspection, humorous cultural assimilation, and sad alienation. I fully expect the content to pop into my mind in the future for various reasons. For example, "The American Couple" will come to mind whenever I'm in a temporary situation (like a vacation or a retreat) and fast friendships are made. The kind you know nothing will come of, but under the circumstances anything is possible.

Another struggle....A white man writing in the Vietnamese (both male and female) voice. Not sure how this will play out over time. I think he did it admirably, but the fact is, it nags at me. Seemed authentic....got the Pulitzer. But was anyone on the Pulitzer committee Vietnamese? Female?

I feel this all sounds overly critical, and Butler had no control over his book being a Pulitzer and doesn't deserve uber-criticism because of it. So, if I randomly picked this up, or read it not knowing it was a Pulitzer, I'd quite likely have swooned over it.

Tara Lynn says

There's a reason this won the Pulitzer. While a few of the stories read more like retellings of myths, they are still so unique and melodic that I give this a 5. One of my favorite story collections.

Sheri says

So, I didn't realize this was a book of short stories until I started it. I knew it was a Pulitzer Price winner and that was enough to make me grab it. Short stories are not my favorites (I prefer a long book in which I can wallow) and sort of automatically come with a max of 4 stars. In general it was an okay collection and I learned a bit about Vietnamese culture, but the stories were not sufficiently different or interesting enough to garner 4 stars.

The stories are all about Vietnamese immigrants in southern American (Louisiana). They touch on race (obviously...and per Edward Hirsch a requirement for a Pulitzer winner) and also sexism and religion as well as cultural assimilation and differences.

I have specific notes below on each story:

Open Arms--I wasn't crazy about this one. It was not the best opener as it was simply a commentary on the differences in sexual expectations and pornographic allowances between the Westerners and the Vietnamese.

Mr. Green--This was interesting. Yes, parrots live a long time and are frequently willed to people. I never really considered, though, that the imitation could increase the mourning of the survivor.

The Trip Back--This was one of my favorites. I enjoyed not only the pragmatism of the narrator, but his recognition of his own assimilation. I like that he acknowledged that he didn't feel anything when his wife was upset, but simply acted in a sympathetic matter anyway. "I found that I myself was no longer comfortable with the old ways. Like the extended family. Like other things too. The Vietnamese indirectness, for instance. The superstition. I was a good American now."

Fairy Tale--I find it interesting that this book is so sexist. Not only are girls not as good as boys, but several of the female characters are prostitutes. I did like the acknowledgement that life is different than stories and I found the miscommunication from tones to be interesting.

A nonsensical sentence about a sunburnt duck was more meaningful than a political statement. And then, of course she makes up her own fairy tale about the apples.

Crickets--I was less interested in this story. The father wants to share his childhood, but can't because of the cultural and physical differences between their lives and generations. It is too overtly poignant to be actually meaningful.

Letters from my Father--Again with the fairy tales and the American with the Vietnamese bride. I enjoyed the incorporation of the shadow man in the story, but I wasn't really attached to the narrator.

Love--"It is a terrible thing to be married to a beautiful woman." Of all the stories so far, this is the most ridiculously sexist. Not only is she only valued for her beauty (my little butterfly): "I understand her limitations, and a wise man does not try to change the things that can't be changed." but she is solely his possession and after he unsuccessfully uses voodoo to "keep" her, she returns to him simply because he was willing to fight. Yuk.

Mid-Autumn--The mother speaks to the fetus and laments that she was not a son, but also we have the motif of dead Vietnamese father and replacement American. It was okay and I enjoyed the cultural lesson of the Rose Silk Thread God.

In the Clearing--So again we have fathers separated from the rest of the family, but in this instance the Vietnamese dad sort of accidentally left. I did enjoy the description of boyhood: "As a boy you wish to be frightened. You like the night; you like the quickness inside you and as you and your friends speak of mysterious things, ghosts and spirits..."

A Ghost Story--I was surprised reading this one to discover that the ancestor shrines were also occasionally devoted to women. Otherwise, the story itself was a bit humdrum...a grim reaper of sorts and yet another

solider during the Vietnam War.

Snow--Again we have the mixed race couple and the female servant perspective. I wasn't not particularly interested in or overwhelmed with this one...but it did make me think of eating Chinese take out.

Relic--I found the idea of a Vietnamese refugee buying one of John Lennon's shoes to be slightly hysterical. It reminded me of middle schoolers trying to figure out what to do to fit in and be cool. I liked the self awareness of the narrator in this one ("spineless poor" and then he explains; he criticizes the vegetable back yards of the Vietnamese in Versailles but also note that he is glad he is alone because it helps him to assimilate).

Preparation--Again, this had a great voice. The ugly friend who has always been jealous of her beautiful (but now dead) best friend is guilt ridden but also still angry and jealous (even though she is the one still living) until she discovers that the friend's breast ha been removed and plans to move on to "take back" the husband. The American Couple--This is the longest story in the book and I was less than enamored. Again there was some interesting dynamics between the husband and wife (power struggles) and also I liked the hot tub racism (the Americans were jealous of the hot Mexican lady and didn't even notice the Vietnamese), but I wasn't sure why it needed to be so long. The soldiers playing war and the girls looking at ponies was interesting commentary on the interchangeability of individuals within their own sex, but overall I was just underwhelmed and slightly bored with the length of this one.

A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain--The title story features an old man who used to personally know Ho Chi Minh. I liked the personalization of the political figure, but I don't know much Vietnamese history (or enough to catch any of the subtleties here).

Salem--This was one of my favorites. I really liked the idea of the Vietnamese guy trying to decide if he should turn in the photograph of the woman and I liked that he identified personality quirks about the man that he had killed. I also found it interesting that Sa lem means to fall and to blur (really what else is death) and that there was just so much worked into this short story.

Missing--This was a great perspective switch. All of the stories have dealt with Vietnamese protagonists, most of whom have emigrated to the US. In this story the protagonist remained in Vietnam and his statement: "I am not missing. I am here. I know the smell of the wood fires and the incense my wife burns for the dead father and mother who gave her to me..." is a great definition of going native. It was a powerful way to end the collection and point out the positives of Vietnamese culture. He also had a great quote expressing a sentiment that my husband said to me a few years ago: "touched those places on your body that were smooth and soft and that are coarser now, and I love them still, I love them more for their very coarsenes."

Susan Bleyle says

This is an absolutely amazing collection of stories about the Vietnamese experience in the 20-year-aftermath (at the time this collection was published) of the Vietnam war. While most of the stories center around families who have resettled and rebuilt their lives in the United States after the war, there are also incredibly powerful stories from other perspectives--including the final, haunting story of an ex-American soldier, supposedly "MIA" for nearly twenty years, who has actually been building a new life for himself with a wife and child in a small, coffee and tobacco growing village in Vietnam. After having read this book, I will never think about the Vietnam war--or any war for that matter--or the refugee experience--in the same way. I highly recommend this short story collection.

Stephen Gallup says

I bought and read this book when it first came out, back in '92, inspired to find it after hearing a radio commentary. At the time, I had just returned from a life-changing stay in Taiwan and was fascinated by all things Asian. Thought of it again this week while reading *The Unwanted* .

This is a collection of stories told from the points of view of various Vietnamese expatriates at various stages in the process of becoming assimilated into American culture. The author has a remarkable ability to speak with authority from many different personalities. I so admire that talent, and just do not get the reaction of another reviewer who claims to be bothered by it. The empathy required to pull this off when the author is not even Vietnamese is praiseworthy, not troubling.

Jesse says

a white guy writing vietnamese stories in choppy language as if it were written by a non-english speaker. nobody thinks in language this choppy, and though ESL speakers might not speak as eloquently in English, it doesn't mean their thoughts are disorganized and choppy. it was also just boring and it felt like a chore to read. i quit part way through.

Susan (aka Just My Op) says

This collection of short stories, of the Vietnamese affected by the war, is probably the best collection of short stories I have ever read. Most of the stories are about immigrants from Vietnam who have ended up in Louisiana. Some are set in Vietnam. All are beautiful.

Not all is sweetness and light, but the reader is shown the heart of the characters. There is darkness and some of the stories are disturbing, but all ring true. This 1993 Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction felt so intimate to me that the people were, in my mind, real.

The prose is lyrical without becoming flowery. The characters are fascinating. The insight is remarkable.

This is one of those rare books that I will want to read again.

Laura says

So, I actually really liked a lot of these stories, but this book bothered me because all the stories are narrated by Vietnamese or Vietnamese Americans and the author is white. I mean, no one should be confined to only write from the perspective of their race/gender, but I can't really get over this one. I've read other books that do the same thing and haven't though twice about it (although maybe I should have thought twice), but this collection of stories is particularly troubling to me.

I've come to the conclusion that it bothers me in this case because Butler went to the trouble to construct 15 stories from the perspective of young, old, women, men, immigrants, people born in the states, successful

business men, waitresses, married, single, etc. It's like he was trying not just to adopt a perspective culturally different from his own--but was attempting to voice an ENTIRE culture. But maybe that was the point. Maybe I was supposed to be bothered?

Maciek says

Robert Olen Butler served in Vietnam 1969 to 1971 - first as a counter-intelligence agent, and then as a translator. In an interview he remembers the time he spent in the country:

The army got me coming out of the University of Iowa, but they sent me to language school for a year before I went over. I spoke fluently from my first day there. And then I did work in intelligence for five months out in the countryside. I loved Vietnam and I loved the culture and I loved the people, I mean instantly. And had access to all of that in most ways other outsiders didn't. I had contacts with woodcutters and farmers and fishermen and provincial police chiefs and so forth and then, this was in 1971, the unit stood down. Some units were starting to go home at that point. I got transferred to Saigon where I worked as a translator and administrative assistant for an American Foreign Service officer who was an advisor to the mayor of Saigon. So it was a civilian-clothes job. I lived in an old French hotel and I worked at Saigon city hall. But every night I would go out after midnight and wander alone into the steamy back alleys of Saigon where nobody ever seemed to sleep. I'd crouch in the doorways with people and talk to them. The Vietnamese people are perhaps the warmest, most generous spirit-people in the world, and they invited me into their houses, and into their culture, and into their lives. And of course, that shaped me as an artist.

After the return to the U.S. he wrote stories, which were accepted and published by various literary journals, such as *The Southern Review*, *The Hudson Review* and *New England Review*. The reviews were good, too - some of the stories got reprinted in a volume of *The Best American Short Stories*, and in 1987 Butler received the *Tu Do Chinh Kien Award* from the Vietnam Veterans of America for outstanding contributions to American culture by a Vietnam veteran. he received broad recognition in 1993, when a collection of these stories - published a year before and titled *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* - was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Many novels have been written about the Vietnam War - both by American and Vietnamese authors - but here the concept is new: Butler gives voice to the Vietnamese refugees to America, who have settled in southern Louisiana - near New Orleans. These stories explore the immigrant experience - the contrast between the immigrants and Americans, and the two countries - Vietnam and the United States - with their vastly different cultures and customs; the distant Far East is contrasted the definition of the West. Each of the stories is narrated in the first person by a different Vietnamese immigrant, and all are filled with a sense of longing and nostalgia for their past lives - their country with its natural beauty and way of life, specific places and moments, the friends and relatives they had to leave behind. The Grove reissue contains two additional stories - *Salem* and *Missing* - which are set in post-war Vietnam, and form a neat narrative coda.

The Vietnam War ended in 1975, after the fall of Saigon, forcing more than three million Vietnamese to flee for safety - hundreds of thousands dying in the process of often dangerous crossing. The majority - around 1,4 million - settled in the United States. These refugees found themselves in a peculiar situation - their old country was taken away from them and transformed into something different, and the new country proved to be completely different, too. Like Tom Hank's character in *The Terminal*, they can't go home - and struggle to live in the new environment. Some stay together in hopes of preserving their heritage and culture, while others openly want to shed it. *There are other Vietnamese here in Lake Charles, Louisiana* - the protagonist

of *Snow* remarks - *but we are not a community. We are all too sad, perhaps, or too tired. But maybe not. Maybe that's just me saying that. Maybe the others are real Americans already.*

In *Crickets*, the Vietnamese man and his wife had a hard time adapting to American culture and life. Their American-born son adapted easily and shows little interest in Vietnamese language and culture, making his father think of a childhood game as a way of becoming closer to the boy. In *Relic*, a Vietnamese man sees America as a land of opportunity. He wishes to break away from the Vietnamese community but his business depends on it. He feels that the other Vietnamese are preventing him from becoming fully American and more successful. The relic of the title is a shoe that was supposedly worn by John Lennon when he was shot to death. The man sees the shoe as a symbol of America, and longs to own the other shoe so his collection can be complete, and he can be complete as a person, an American person. But even he lives in the past: he remembers the wife he left in Vietnam, who did not want to abandon her country and chose to stay there with their children, but expresses no desire to return to them; he wishes to get away from the Vietnamese community as he feels that it drags him back to Vietnam, and become a part of the American community, pursue his own American Dream and establish his own identity in his new country.

Butler's Vietnamese characters are unique, with their own quirks and distinctive characteristics. In *Love* a jealous husband used to bring doom on his wife's suitors in Vietnam, and struggles to do the same in the U.S.; he journeys to New Orleans to search for a voodoo master who will put a curse on the man whom he suspects she is having an affair. *Letters from my Father* is narrated by a Vietnamese girl, who has grown up without her American father, and with whom she is having a difficult and distant relationship. She discovers a stack of his old letters to the U.S. government, where he writes with fury and longing, demanding his daughter be allowed entrance to the U.S. and accusing the government of deliberately keeping them separate for years, arguing that if she was white they would welcome her with open arms. In *The Trip Back* a Vietnamese woman eagerly awaits to be reunited with her grandfather, and has been arranging for him to live in the U.S. for years. He is finally allowed to immigrate to America and her husband drives to pick him up from the airport. There he discovers that the elderly man has gone senile, and lives so deeply in the past that he is able to remember the color and smell of the South China Sea, but has no recollection of his granddaughter, who loves him deeply. Her husband fears that he too will become like the old man, unable to remember both his homeland and his wife.

Mr. Green is narrated by a Vietnamese woman, who remembers her grandfather. The story touches on the theme of subjugation of women in Vietnamese society before and during the war, with the grandfather telling her that she can't pray for the souls of her ancestors because she is a female. She came to the U.S. with his parrot, Mr. Green, whose favorite saying is "not possible", and tries to find her identity in a society experiencing the sexual revolution and second-wave feminism, coping with the feelings of love and obligation, resentment and death.

Fairy Tale is an all-American tale of success, and seems to be written to spite critics accusing the author of putting on a yellowface and exploiting Asian characters - it's an unbearably cliched story of a Miss Noi (as in Hanoi without the Ha), a Vietnamese prostitute who works as a stripper in a New Orleans bar and meets a G.I. who asks her out. It's almost ridiculously stereotypical and predictable, but very consciously so - it's very self-aware of all its flaws, and by this it turns them into its advantages. It's also full of humor, employing the peculiar feature of the Vietnamese language where the meaning of the word depends on how it is said - one man wants to woo Miss Noi by trying to say "May Vietnam live for ten thousand years" in Vietnamese, but what he says - very clearly - is "The sunburnt duck is lying down".

These stories also employ elements of mysticism and Vietnamese folklore, such as the beautiful *Mid-Autumn*, where an expectant mother tells a fairy tale to her unborn child, about the emperor who went to the moon and found happiness there, remembering her lover who died in Vietnam. In the title story a dying man is visited by the ghost of Ho Chi Minh, with whom he has worked as a youth; Ho confesses to his friend that he is not at peace, and political tensions between the Vietnamese Americans play in the

background. *A Ghost Story* is a story which the narrator claims to be true, about the ghost of a beautiful Vietnamese woman, Miss Linh, who saved his acquaintance from a disaster. When he found her again to thank her, she devoured him alive. The man telling the story also has seen the woman two times, and although she spared his life he is also devoured - by a ghost of a whole country, which continues to torment him in his new American life. In America he is a ghost, riding the Greyhound in an attempt to escape his demons. The last two stories *Salem* and *Missing* are narrated by two soldiers, Vietnamese and American, who stay in the country. *Salem* comes from the pack of cigarettes that the Vietnamese soldier finds on a body of an American GI that he has killed - along with the picture of his girlfriend, and *Missing* is the only story in the collection narrated by an American. It's a reversal of the theme of Vietnamese immigrants trying to live in American society - here an American is trying to live among the Vietnamese in their country and culture. The narrator is a U.S. soldier who has stayed in Vietnam after the war and married a Vietnamese girl, and together they raise their daughter. He has been living in a village with his family in peace for a long time, until one day someone brings an American newspaper which has a photo of him taken from a distance, recognizing him as one of the soldiers who went MIA and implying that he needs help to be brought back from Vietnam to America. But the narrator thinks differently - "I'm not missing. I'm here", he says, and he feels it - he is in his village, with his people and family.

The stories in this collection are written with care and compassion, giving voice to those who are largely unheard in this particular branch of fiction. It is remarkable that such a deeply felt and personal book about Vietnamese immigrants would be written by a white American - which is only a testament to the author's respect and admiration for the people he met in Vietnam, and who moved him to write these stories. They are beautifully written, full of honesty and compassion, without pretension. Different voices of these stories come together in this remarkable collection - a worthy winner of the Pulitzer, which I am very happy to have discovered and will gladly return in the future.

Cheryl says

Even as the light purple hues of dusk shifted into night, I sat still, completing this book. Never mind that the only reading light I had was the dim glare of outdoor lighting because by then, I was transfixed. I had been transported to another world and I only realized this once those gigantic Southern bugs started to land on my page and I heard the faint whimper of my dog as she stared at me through the sliding glass doors—probably wondering what in the world I was doing sitting outdoors without her.

I had the great privilege to sit in on Butler's *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction* seminar and now I see how his advice is indeed personal. In order to head back to the Vietnam of 1971, when he served as a Vietnamese linguist, he also had to transport himself from America, back to what must have been a dark time for him. I remember him telling a room full of students (paraphrasing this) that the test is not in the four hours that the writer goes back to this dreamlike state of imaginative trauma, rather, it is in how he or she manages to exist for the next twenty hours of real life, *after* he or she has revisited such a place.

Reading this 1993 Pulitzer-prize-winner, you get a sense that Butler wrote these stories from where he dreams.

Whenever a short-story collection adds a distinct checkmark to my reading experience, I often find myself flipping back through the pages with curiosity, closely examining each line just to understand the 'how.' It is in the bewitching voices of each Vietnamese character: young, old, male, female. Those first-person

perspectives that drew me closer to each story. The haunting concoction of Vietnamese and American cultures. Butler took a huge risk when he decided to write about the challenges of the immigrant war survivor in America.

That night, I found myself in the mind of a Vietcong soldier, a Vietcong defector, an American MIA, and a Vietnamese refugee. With each convincing story and compelling voice of the narrator, I was transported to Vietnam and then back to America, to immigrant settlements in Louisiana: like Versailles and Lake Charles. When you read short-story collections often, it is thrilling whenever you run across a collection whose thematic appeal stands apart in this genre because you know that years later, if you need to point to a collection that encompasses Vietnam in such a way, you will point to this one.

Tuckova says

I forgot that I finished this finally. I didn't throw it, but I definitely didn't like it very much. I think that writers CAN write from other points of view (just like readers can read and understand different points of view than their own) but all but one narrator rang false; what I heard behind the "Vietnamese" voice was always a white guy, probably from the midwest, who maybe went to Vietnam for a while. I can hear him working on it. Oddly, the story that had the strongest and most-likely-to-go-wrong voice (Fairy Tale) was the only one I liked.

Sterlingcindysu says

Even though this wasn't a pool read (book to read by the pool that doesn't matter if it gets wet and easy to pick up and get back in the groove after days away), it could have been, up til the last story. The first 13 stories were like potato chips and I couldn't gobble them down fast enough.

I checked this out after my husband read/bought it. I tend to dismiss Vietnam War books--too depressing, violent, mucho macho military men figures, and I'm getting a little burned out from WWII novels lately. But this isn't a Vietnam War book (except for that draggy 14th story), it's more about the Vietnamese who immigrate here and settle in Louisiana. The back cover says it blends Vietnamese folklore with American realities and that's exactly right.

Loved the story of the cuckolded husband who went to the voodoo doctor and actually got all the supplies together to throw some nasty gris-gris at "the other man"! While the stories weren't humorous there was a sense of hope with all of them. For example, one Vietnamese girl ponders about the beginning of fairy tales, "Once upon a time". Since a cowboy during the war told her he used to get "up on" a bull, she pictures how during the telling of a fairy tale, you get "up on" the back of time and you don't know where or when you'll get off. Very poetic.

Pulitzer Prize winner 1993.

Joshua Rigsby says

This is a unique short story anthology, as all the characters are connected, however tangentially, to the

Vietnamese expatriate community near New Orleans. Most of these stories are good, and some of them are very good. There were only a couple bad apples, and even those were bearable. Dramatic, surprising, funny, they run the gamut.

I had the sense throughout that Butler knew these characters and their culture very well. The amount of detail and specificity seemed to come from someone who had known and experienced these things first hand, which I appreciated very much.

I'd recommend it to anyone interested in the region, the culture, the history, or the genre. Well done.

See my own short stories at <http://joshuarigsby.com>.
