

# Vietnamese through the eyes of a foreigner



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Robert Olen Butler's collection of short stories in his novella, "A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain," explores issues confronting Vietnamese immigrants in America after the conclusion of the U. S. war in Vietnam. With great care, Butler exhibits the experiences of displaced Vietnamese such as indifference, dislocation, adjustment, and acculturation encountered after the fall of Saigon and the loss of their nation. The original stories are narrated through the voices of Vietnamese Americans who are residing in and around the New Orleans area. Most likely in response to POW/MIA concerns, Butler later added two additional short stories (last two in the collection) that provides a perspective of a Communist fighter still in Vietnam and an American defector who is still living in a remote and poverty stricken location in Vietnam. Butler's novel was an instant hit winning the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1993. Although there are few cynical critics of Butler's work there is little contention in how he structured and depicted the struggles and social issues facing the Vietnamese. I support his work because of the great level of sociological, anthropological, historical, and realistic manner he utilized in capturing/delivering the Vietnamese "other."

Dan Schneider a book critic from an International Writers Magazine-Hackwriters expressed a quite mixed messaged review. He asserts, "At his best Butler gets inside a foreign identity, while at his worst he utterly fails, as in Fairy Tale. Yet, most of the characters are very human, and relatable." Although Schneider seems to have enjoyed the majority of the stories in Butler's book his pessimistic comments are without substance. His dismissal of the book's accomplishments and failures are presented without any in-depth analysis into the underpinnings of the book, its symbolism, or the notion of the difficult task that Butler set out to frame. He provides rather

<https://assignbuster.com/vietnamese-through-the-eyes-of-a-foreigner/>

brief and mindless commentary with no explanations such as, “ Snow is a tale that is mediocre. Relic is a tale with promise, about a man who claims to own one of the shoes John Lennon was wearing when he was shot to death, yet it ends poorly. Preparation, about two former friends reunited- one dead, one alive- is another good tale, especially on the heels of some of the lesser stories it follows. The American Couple is, after Fairy Tale, the worst in the book, mainly because it’s the longest, at 80 pages, and follows two American couples- one white and one Vietnamese- in Mexico. Not much occurs in all its pages.” Nonetheless, Schneider does provide some praise in his closing statements, “ Butler can touch on similar themes in such dissimilar ways shows that he is a true artist with the pen.” This statement is written proof that the story and messages Butler was telling were incomprehensible and impenetrable to Schneider’s blatant simpleton mode of thinking.

Additionally, a book critic from the New York Times, George Packer also points out the relative weaknesses and strengths in Butler’s short stories but unlike Schneider provides reasons for each position creating a comprehensive and insightful review. The weaknesses Packer points out are mainly concerning substance and story structure but in whole he credits Butler for what he has achieved in the construct of this book. Packer asserts, “ A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain” goes a long way toward making the Vietnamese real, and its method is bold...The Americans have become foils; it’s the Vietnamese who are now at the center, haunted by the past, ambivalent about their hosts, suffering sexual torments, seeking a truce in their various wars.” Packer continues, “ They (the short stories) are the work of a writer who is intoxicated by Vietnam and the Vietnamese, who loves what has alienated so many other Americans, including novelists.” In my

opinion, to analyze a historical novel's value beyond a "face value" entertainment factor requires a reader/reviewer that can read between the lines, grab a feel of the characters, setting, theme, and plot-understand them for what they represent and how it relates the author and the outside social phenomenon. As a result, the intention of this essay is to provide examples of Butler's skill in portraying fairly accurate experiences of displaced Vietnamese which is a hefty task in its own right. At the same time, although as close as his construct may be, I also intend to draw out flaws in the stories where Butler's cultural shortcomings are manifested. However it is important to note that there are more manifestations of the latter than the former, thus highlighting his achievement in this ultimately difficult endeavor.

Nonetheless, Butler's true accomplishment is displayed in the skill and tactfulness of how he represented real life issues and phenomena facing displaced Vietnamese through their eyes despite him being an American and ethnic outsider to their world. His portrayal is evidence that with the right experience and knowledge non-members of a culture can represent, depict, and describe the feelings and social phenomenon of "the other." Butler is one of the few writers I have encountered so far that provides a virtually precise and alternate perspective of the Vietnamese experience through almost "native eyes." By Butler adding the last two stories in his novella although valuable as they may be in context to the overall post-war Vietnam experience, they seem somewhat displaced, therefore I do not offer commentary. Interestingly, Butler chose to narrate his stories through the eyes and voices of expatriate Vietnamese in the U. S. By this, he has shown that the Vietnam War experience and the cultural exchanges thereafter not only brought the war to America physically but also mentally in Vietnamese

migrants, U. S. Vietnam Veterans, their families, and America on the whole. The fact that Butler being a linguist and a veteran of the war himself, creates a unique relationship and a solid basis to recount the social experiences in a comprehensive manner that both draws from his advanced understanding and familiarity of Vietnamese and U. S. Vietnam veterans experiences. Butler developed his characters identity through his extensive knowledge of the Vietnamese language, culture, backed by his in-depth grasp of Vietnamese socio-anthropological issues. Butler was a counter-intelligence agent during the war which gave him ample opportunity to further comprehend Vietnamese society & culture. Also important to note, Butler had a solid educational background (BA in Theater & MFA in Playwriting) to fall back on before delving into the Vietnamese language and culture granting him better comprehension of “ the other” which ultimately shows in his ability to write but to portray the Vietnamese so convincingly. Additionally, Butler moved to Louisiana before writing the collection-a place comparable to the Vietnam Delta’s he spent during the war. There is also a large population of Vietnamese expatriates which also gave texture in Butler’s choice of theme, setting, and character identities in the story. The relocation to Louisiana put him “ back on the front lines” so to speak where the war continued in the hearts and minds of numerous Vietnamese refugees. Its theme highlights Butler’s characters who are coping with post-war affects (ongoing struggles) concerning the loss of their nation, dislocation, difference, acculturation, and closure. Significantly, Butler’s own experiences are somewhat comparable to displaced Vietnamese in America. In the broadest sense, by Butler learning Vietnamese language & culture beforehand and spending time in the war, it required him to experience some sense of difference, dislocation &

acculturation that the Vietnamese boat people experienced when immigrating abroad. This is a similar phenomenon in many ways because by being taken from his native environment and being forced to function in the war torn country that was foreign to him-(to an extremely less extent). This experience possibly provided another dimension to the characters. Even more impressively, Butler accomplished his character constructs without using real life people as the basis. In a 2000 interview with [powell.com](http://powell.com), Butler claimed, "Of the fifteen narrators in *A Good Scent*, not one of them has a real life counterpart." (Murgatroid, 2000). For example in the titular story *A Good Scent* from *A Strange Mountain*, Thang, Loi and Dao's daughters lives are shaped by their ongoing experiences of difference, dislocation, acculturation on their path to closure from the pain, confusion, and anguish the war and their forced migration to America signifies. These phenomena are intertwined in the Vietnamese Diaspora that Butler wittingly utilizes in his characters inner and outer struggles in their new home. This story also presents what the core issues faced by Vietnamese in America-the ongoing transported qualms from the war, dislocation, and affects of natural assimilation into American culture vs. enforcement of maintaining traditional culture and identity. For example, Thang and Loi secretly talk about the murder they carried out against a fellow countryman because of his supportive stance to reconciliation with the communist government. Dao unknowingly to Thang and Loi catches wind of what has transpired-a brutal murder. Dao makes note of this and despite his yearning to make it known he chooses not to open up in fear of disrupting his family harmony. Dao being the head of the family, is disturbed because he realizes members of his family have become too "Americanized" and that he too is

contemplating on being “ Un-Vietnamese” by breaking the silence of the murder he knows his son-in-law and grandson have committed. He chooses in the end to stay silent in order to not to disrupt family harmony which is a pillar in traditional Vietnamese culture. Butler also displayed in-depth knowledge of the culture in his incorporation of Vietnamese ancient (dragon fairytale) and modern history (the book itself), folklore (in Snow & In the Clearing), cultural holidays & practices (Mid-Autumn & Preparation) and the presence of pre-war ideological battles within the Vietnamese community itself induced by the process of French colonization. The pre-war inner and outer ideological battles are presented in his frequent mention of the North-South division amongst settlers in the U. S. Butler accurately described resentment that Catholics from the North faced upon their arrival in the South before and during the war and how this was transferred to America in the Vietnamese decision to segregate themselves in either Northern or Southern communities in the greater New Orleans area. Butler represented the real life cultural biases and prejudices that Vietnamese deal with amongst themselves and incorporates it throughout several of the short stories (Relic, Crickets, Snow, Fairytale, Mr. Green, & Open Arms). This ideological “ clash of cultures” was presented in Mr. Green which is the story about one middle-aged Vietnamese woman who recalls memories about her grandfather through his parrot. The battle has been troubling her for so many years are her family’s deep division over religion-Catholicism (brought by the French) and (traditional) ancestral worship. Although the main character of the story has always wanted to respect the wishes of her deceased grandfather she cannot because her generational conversion to Catholicism. Stuck in tradition, her grandfather was always upset about this

because he felt that their ancestors' spirits were left behind in sort of a spiritual limbo. This is coupled by her families forced migration to America. These concerns bothered her grandfather to his deathbed before migrating and now her as the parrot would not let her forget. In many ways, the main character seems to be dealing with an identity crisis brought on by cultural/ideological clash within her and her family. She is frustrated that she cannot take on this important familial role of taking care of her ancestors-grandfathers wishes. Ironically superstition and ancestral worship thinking has not been wiped away as she often ponders if the parrot is her reincarnated grandfather-a traditional Vietnamese belief. In the end, (despite her being Catholic) she decides to end kill the dying parrot who she feels is her reincarnated grandfather by snapping its neck. In a way, this is her way with dealing with these contradictions because it has torn at her all along. In *The Trip Back*, Butler displays struggles Vietnamese immigrants faced as they became acculturated into American culture. Khanh, the main character of the story is going through a self-realization of his changes that has made him less in tune with traditional Vietnamese ways. Khanh's Americanization is voiced well with these comments, " I have become a blunt man, not like a Vietnamese at all. It's the way I do business." Khanh continues to explain, " I found that I myself was no longer comfortable with the old ways.... Like the extended family...the indirectness, for instance...The superstition." (Butler, pgs. 36 & 40). Additionally in *Crickets*, Thieu-or " Ted" the main character vents his problems concerning his coping with difference, dislocation, adjustment, and acceptance issues after living in America for several years. On page 59, Thieu explains his dislike of his new American name and place in American society, "...They call me Ted because they want to think of me

<https://assignbuster.com/vietnamese-through-the-eyes-of-a-foreigner/>



as one of them, though sometimes it bothers me that these men are so much bigger than me. I am the size of a woman in this country..." Later in the story, Thieu attempts to teach one of his favorite Vietnamese childhood pastimes to his son. Although as hard as Thieu tries, he finally realizes towards the end his efforts are futile as he cannot even find the right type of crickets to carry out a fight nor the less keep the attention of his son who is the least interested. On page 60, Thieu describes the disconnection between him and his son, " He is proud to have been born in America...when he leaves he says "" Have a good day ya'll." Sometimes I say goodbye to him in Vietnamese and he wrinkles his nose at me and says, " Aw, Pop" like I'd just cracked a funny joke. He doesn't speak Vietnamese at all and my wife says not to worry about that. He is an American."" Although Thieu seems a bit frustrated at the outside world trying to make him " one of them." He seems to come to terms with it for the most part in his son. He feels that he must maintain his Vietnamese identity and part of his " Vietnameseeness." It seems the idea of Thieu's son " being an American", although at times bitterly taken pushes him to realize that his family is both-especially him. He is both Ted and Thieu, both Vietnamese and American gained from his migration to America. This is a common theme in several of the short stories as Butler's characters realize they are changed by their experience in America. They begin to view themselves differently despite cultural and inner clashes with self, group, and identity. It seems as people are acculturated/assimilated into the host culture, they begin to view themselves similar to the cultural lenses of the host culture-a culture so different and foreign that they feel may have felt so indifferent to them in the first place is now what they are or have become. As in Thieu's case, acceptance of a dual identity has surfaced but

not yet realized. Another important aspect of the Vietnamese Diaspora Butler captures is in *Letters from My Father*. In this short story he recounts the experiences through the eyes of an Amerasian child who was left behind in Vietnam with her mother for several years before immigrating to the U. S. Now in America, the woman recalls her experiences in post-war Vietnam as a “bui doi”-literally translated as “dust of life” as Amerasian offspring were derogatorily referred to. This is a historically accurate phenomenon and common occurrence in Vietnam that Butler picked up on. The problem was left unattended to for many years before Operation Babylift and the subsequent loosening of U. S. immigration laws took responsibility for this issue. In the meantime, half-breed American children were left behind to unfair and dismal lives under strict Communist regime. They were given a lesser status and ignored by the U. S. until the late 80s early 90s. Also noteworthy, Butler’s Vietnamese linguistic ability enabled him to make further observations as to how the Vietnamese see and view the world. This knowledge of the culture and language is invaluable when trying to understand and make sense of “the other” and more so if a writer is to depict his foreign characters with a sense of reality (I was also trained Vietnamese interpreter for the U. S. Army). One example of the author’s cultural knowledge is his reference and understanding of the significance of the Vietnamese family structure and values intertwined in their culture. He made it this notion evident as at least part if not the whole dilemma in his characters experiences in migrating to the U. S. He also used the Vietnamese linguistic/cultural knowledge in the way he associates context and dialogue between his characters. This precision proves Butler is someone with more than a rudimentary knowledge of the language and

<https://assignbuster.com/vietnamese-through-the-eyes-of-a-foreigner/>

culture thus allowing him to paint a true picture in the Vietnamese voices of his characters. For example the visual experience provided by the waitress in Snow. Her mental vivid description of what most Westerners would dismiss displays Butler's attention to detail concerning Mr. Cohen's nose-in a Vietnamese fashion. The narrator in Fairy Tale, Miss Noi is delivered accurately. Her usage of what seems broken English is how Vietnamese who have not mastered English talk. Butler must have studied Vietnamese in America who learned English at less proficient levels allowing him to devise her voice. While analyzing his proficiency of the language, I noticed only one incident where Butler inaccurately uses the Vietnamese. In A Ghost Story, the main character Trung refers to himself to the elderly mother of the deceased lady as Major Trung (Butler, pg. 117). For the most part and my experiences working with the U. S. military in Vietnam with Vietnamese from 2003 to 2007, never encountered my military counterparts refer to themselves by rank with each other or to outside people in the community. It is most common that Vietnamese refer to people and themselves differentially along family rank whether if blood relation exists. It would be more accurate to use an inferior personal pronoun such as nephew (chau) or child (con) in this context depending on whether he spoke Northern Vietnamese or Southern. Although it seems minor, it does detract from the reality of the way "the other" is depicted. Despite this minute error there are many opportunities to make mistakes in other stories in the book where there would be a high level of Vietnamese dialogue between the characters (although presented in English for the reader). Some of the context seems to be written and even thought in English as it would make sense as some of the characters are going through the process of assimilation/acclturation.

Nonetheless, throughout the book there are few instances where the dialogue seems unrealistic or cultural erroneous. These discrepancies are minor when examining the entirety of the book given the author was not a direct member of the culture. This inaccuracy can possibly be attributed to this natural "gap" since although he understands the other, he ultimately is not "the other". In sum, when compared to other writers who attempt to correctly depict people outside their cultural basis through unbiased and knowledgeable means, there is always room for error as Butler's minimal misuses of language and dialogue exhibits. When compared to another author who has depicted "the other", John Burdett (Drowns, 2008), James Olen Butler most definitely comes out as the victor in portraying a more precise and realistic world through the eyes of a "native." But this should not discredit Burdett's work as his story did not deal with foreigners being acculturated into the American culture. This may have given Butler an edge ultimately making his task an easier one. Both authors' regardless what level of attainment they have for internalizing the knowledge and experiences of "the other", both authors are points in case nonetheless that an inevitable cultural gap exists and the fact that author's cultural biasness, misperceptions in historical accuracy (typical contradiction in historical fiction novels), lack of cultural/linguistic understanding that they were originally enculturated into (regardless of the level that they have been acculturated into the host or other culture), find their basis to their own identities will seep through the fine lines in the depiction of "the other." References: Butler, R. 1992. *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, Grove Press, New York, NY. Drowns, W. 2008, *Literary Review: John Burdett's Bangkok Eight*, unpublished book review, Hawaii Pacific University Murgatroid. March 3, <https://assignbuster.com/vietnamese-through-the-eyes-of-a-foreigner/>

2000. Powell. com interview with Murgatroid, viewed online on April 9, 2008, at: < [http://www. powells. com/authors/butler. html](http://www.powells.com/authors/butler.html)> Packer, G. June 7, 1992. From the Mekong to the Bayous, New York Times Online archive, Review of a Good Scent from a Strange Mountain viewed on April 9, 2008 at: Schneider, D. 2005. Untitled Hackwriters review website article, viewed on April 9, 2008 at: