

Book Review: *The Boat*

I will not equivocate: Nam Le's *The Boat*<sup>1</sup> is one of the most well-crafted collection of short stories I have ever read. Upon first buying the book, I expected it to be entirely about the Vietnamese refugee experience. In some ways, it is. But as a whole, it is so much greater than that—it functions both as an archaeological exercise in uncovering Faulkner's "old verities" (16) within the human condition, as well as a metaphysical introspective of Nam Le's own neuroses and existential crises as a writer. This framing device is what is so alluring about *The Boat*; Le's first story, "Love and Honor" is a self-referential and self-aware acknowledgement of the challenges of writing good ethnic literature; at one moment in the story, Le's friend implies that ethnic literature is incompatible with writing harmoniously with Faulkner's old verities (16). Le rejects this presupposition; in his subsequent six stories, Le establishes his own operational definition of "good ethnic literature" *without once mentioning ethnic literature again*. This is a masterstroke; by truly inhabiting the personas of seven completely unrelated ethnic characters, Le argues that good ethnic literature does not have to be exploitation of—or constrained within—his Vietnamese heritage. Thus, Le artfully solves his dilemma; he explores the "old verities" that good writing supposedly embodies—Love and Honor, Pity and Pride, Sacrifice and Compassion—by writing his own brand of ethnic literature in his own authentic way.

The first story sets up a framework through which we must interpret the following six stories. "Love and Honor" is loosely autobiographical, following a Vietnamese-

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<sup>1</sup> Nam Le, *The Boat*, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 2008

Australian writer named Nam who struggles with meeting a short story deadline. It is only when he sits down with his father and learns deeply about Vietnam that he is able to write what he believes is a “*great* story” (23). However, his father burns the manuscript as soon as he reads it because he believes that it is an inauthentic fictionalization of the My Lai massacre. In fact, Le admits “maybe [he is] filling in the gaps” and that his version of the story is “close enough” (23). Here, Nam Le—both the author and the character—asks the central question of *The Boat*: is it possible to write a great ethnic story while simultaneously remaining authentic?

The second story, “Cartagena”, is the first of a six-part answer to that question. This story, which describes the journey of a Colombian assassin assigned to kill his best friend, is a stark departure from the quasi-autobiographical story that precedes it. It is as if, by this jarring contrast, Le forces us to ask the question: is “Cartagena” both a great ethnic story *and* an authentic one? The first condition is satisfied; “Cartagena” is a pulse-pounding fiction about South American drug cartels. But is it authentic? Our natural response is a resounding *no*. Le is not a Colombia assassin; the story cannot possibly be based on real-life experiences. And yet, the story is incredibly natural. For example, the dialogue of the characters, while written in English, is remarkably Spanish. Instead of saying, “when he was only six years old,” Nam Le writes, “when he *had* only six years”(43). This distinction may seem trivial, but is not in Spanish. The former example is an English idiom; it is ungrammatical to say, equivalently, “cuando él era seis años”. Instead, Spanish speakers say “cuando él *tiene* seis años”. Another example occurs when Ron speaks about Claudia’s past relationship with him, mentioning, “we used to go together” (49). The Spanish verb for “to date” is appropriately “salir”, which Le accurately renders as “to go”.

It is not only idiomatic nuances like these, but also cultural references that are striking; the mentions of a character's "Nike Mercurial Vapors [and] Adidas Squadra jersey" are timely cultural allusions (56). Furthermore, Xavier's reputation as a hit man derives from his murdering of the man who killed Colombian defender Escobar (43). Andrés Escobar was a real-life defenseman for the Colombian national team in the World Cup in 1994. When he scored an own-goal and knocked his own team out of the World Cup against the United States, he was assassinated. Details like these lend the story an uncanny realism, as Nam Le asks us to reevaluate what it means to be authentic.

The third story, "Meeting Elise", recounts an estranged father's attempt to reconcile with his daughter after 18 years. Here, Le too warps our preconception of authentic writing; Le inhabits the mind of an old, jaded man. In one of his most impressive showcases of talent, Le writes about how Henry Luff "hate[s] the young...that they're assured in their beauty...unmussed by death" (93), and how the old man's frail, dying body contrasts with his daughter's "strong, straight body" (99). The way he crafts Henry, the way he writes Henry's macabre jokes about his hemorrhoids (Henry's "ass must have looked like black pudding" after the procedure (77); his "ass burning from all the wrong-way traffic" (80)), Le captures a regretful nostalgia and dark humor that seems incredibly fitting for a jaded, dying man. Again, Le is testing our constructed notion of authenticity.

The fourth story, "Halflead Bay", complements "Meeting Elise". In "Meeting Elise", Le portrays a jaded man dying of cancer trying to contact his adolescent daughter. In "Halflead Bay", Le inhabits an adolescent Australian boy trying to relate with his terminally ill mother. Le's portraying of young love, how its euphoria causes severe myopia to those involved, is incredible; Jamie cannot even come to terms with his

mother's multiple sclerosis because is too preoccupied with Allison or fighting Dory to win over Allison. The most obvious symptom of this tunnel vision occurs when Jamie's father asks him to persuade his mother to move to the city to get better treatment, but Jamie cannot bring himself to do so because that means he will have to move away from Allison (125). The story is so casually littered with Australian slang ("C'arn" (117), "Farkin" (112), "Cracked on to" (132)), the details so much stranger-than-fiction, that it would not be reasonable to equivocate between Jamie and the real-life author Nam Le. Perhaps Le is provoking us to come to this conclusion, begging the question: what makes this story authentic? Is it the knowledge that Nam Le, the author, grew up in Australia? Or is it rather the intimate detailing of the writing?

The fifth story, "Hiroshima", is the story of a Japanese girl in the moments before the atomic bomb obliterates her life. This is the one story, in my opinion, that is unnecessary. The account is merely an exercise in style; Nam Le employs only simple sentences, rarely using compound or compound-complex sentences to imitate the lexicon of a young Japanese girl. However, the story is too underdeveloped to be authentic. Instead, imbuing the characters with wartime propaganda ("one hundred million deaths with honor!"(173); "I am filled with such love for my nation I forget my hunger and nearly cry too" (173)) only gives them the feel of a choppy, Japanese caricature of a person. This story, while interesting stylistically, perhaps does little to advance Nam Le's otherwise compelling exploration of the concept of authenticity.

The sixth story, "Tehran Calling", is one of the most extraordinary pieces of the collection. It is the first time, discounting the rather weak "Hiroshima", that Le inhabits the mind of a woman. In this story, he writes about a former corporate-lawyer in Iran. Here, Le showcases his immense talent, summarily articulating the modern feminist's

struggle. Sarah is a successful corporate lawyer, but needs Paul to give her “a deeper, truer life...[because] he could anchor her” (201); how can she retain her own agency as a woman if she is dependent on a man for her self-worth? This feminist struggle is juxtaposed against the backdrop of the starkly misogynistic Persian society, where a 13-year old girl has been recently raped and killed. Nam Le, in one of his best moments, creates a complex relationship between Sarah and her activist friend, Parvin. Parvin is fighting for woman’s rights on a national scale, while Sarah is undergoing more of an internal struggle. They both are wrestling with the same aforementioned feminist problem, but Nam Le reveals a nuanced, passive-aggressive tension in their relationship, which comes to a head when Sarah exclaims to Parvin, “I’m sorry that my problems were never as impressive as yours” (217). Yet, in the final scene, amidst the random police arrests, Sarah realizes she is still fiercely loyal to her friend. Nam Le’s nuanced portrayal of a female friendship again asks us to reconsider what we mean by authentic.

The seventh and final story, “The Boat” functions as the ultimate response to the question Le explores in his first story: is it possible to write a great ethnic story while simultaneously remaining authentic? He has proven in his previous stories that he can write authentically. He has proven that he can inhabit others’ ethnicities convincingly. But this story is his first attempt at an ethnic story in the strictest sense; it about his own status as a descendant of Vietnamese refugees. This story is thus his final thesis; the integrity and success of his argument that ethnic literature can be authentic as well as artistic rests on the execution of this story.

This story is the story of my mother. It is almost exactly told as my mother tells of her maritime escape to the Philippines during the height of the war—under unceasing threat of pirates, Viet Cong checkpoints, and dwindling rations. After reading “The

Boat”, the six other stories fade, becoming scaffolding for this masterpiece of an ending. It is here that we truly understand what Nam Le is accomplishing with his seven short stories. In the first six, Nam Le’s race is undetectable in his prose. I would believe you if you told me the author of any of the first six stories were any of the following: a Vietnamese-Australian writer, a Colombian ex-con, a 70-year old painter, an Australian adolescent, or an American woman in Iran. But in this last story, Nam Le’s race is omnipresent in his writing. From the Vietnamese ballad in the opening scenes (241), the description of white storax flowers (244), the verbal hallmarks of the Vietnamese language, and the harrowing realism of the boat, Nam Le convinces us that he is unmistakably Vietnamese. In doing so, Nam Le executes the most brilliant move by answering quite simply the question posed in his first story: can ethnic literature be authentic and artful?

The answer comes back to our now-revised definition of authenticity. Authentic does not mean factual, Nam Le contends. All ethnic literature is fictional to some degree. Authenticity comes from an intimate understanding of the human condition. Nam Le writes of love and honor in “Halflead Bay” and “Meeting Elise”, of pity and pride in “Cartagena” and “Tehran Calling”, and of compassion and sacrifice in all of them. Combining his deep understanding of the old verities with an enormous dedication to his craft, Nam Le has created great ethnic literature in *The Boat*.