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## The Refugees (Book Review)

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# BOOK REVIEWS

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*The Refugees*. Nguyen, Viet Thanh. New York: Grove Press. 207 pp. ISBN: 978-0802126399. Reviewed by Howard Schaap, Assistant Professor of English, Dordt College.

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It's hard to imagine a more timely release for a book titled *The Refugees* than Viet Thanh Nguyen's collection of short stories published by Grove Press earlier this year. Nguyen, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his 2016 novel *The Sympathizer*, followed it up this year with this polished collection of short stories.

But what's with that title? On the one hand, *The Refugees* is so broadly generic as to be almost dismissible. Can you imagine a book titled *The Poor*?

On the other hand, that may be exactly the point. When Christians misquote Jesus' line "the poor you will always have with you," it's usually a way to lump millions of individuals into a huge container and slam the door. It may be exactly the same thing with the use of our term "refugees"—that is, that very label demands further questioning. Refugees from where? From what? To where? Into what?

And yet, of course, if we want to know about "the refugees" today from, for example, Syria, we can learn much from other refugee groups—think of the "boat people" of the past from Vietnam or, closer to home, Cuba and Haiti. When we reflect at all, the history of the world is a primer in refugee awareness. Nguyen's *The Refugees* is a carefully crafted account of, not *the* refugee experience, but of refugee experiences.

Perhaps above all, Nguyen creates striking *individuals* from among "the refugees" as well as those immediately surrounding that group. There's the ghostwriter who only goes out at night and who, when she sees the ghost of her brother who tried and failed to protect her from pirates at the cost of his life, decides to write her own ghost stories.

There's a young man who is sponsored by a gay couple in San Francisco, the first time he himself can openly acknowledge his own homosexuality.

There's an aging, womanizing, physical education teacher who slashes his son's ex-girlfriend's tires when she won't take him back.

There's a retired American pilot who visits Vietnam when his daughter goes there to teach English and who watches robots designed to find and disable the bombs he himself dropped on behalf of the U.S. government.

There's a Latino gambling addict and liver transplant recipient who accidentally finds out the name of his Vietnamese donor, tracks down that donor's son, and stores knockoff name-brand goods in his garage for that son—only to find out he's been conned.

For anyone with experience with refugees, *The Refugees* will resonate. Recently, my wife commented that her mother, a refugee from Laos over thirty years ago, had been keeping clothes over the years to take back to people in Laos. It's the refugee mindset, I couldn't help but think, or rather, *a* refugee mindset. *The Refugees* covers a variety of these responses to life in a new place, removed from everything one used to know, over several decades and generations.

The book opens with perhaps the most famous story of refugees, the story of trauma, in "Black-Eyed Women." The narrator of the story is a ghostwriter penning a book for a man named Victor, who was the sole survivor of a plane crash that also took the lives of his entire family. The ghostwriter has found solace—or even, perhaps in a world of trauma, a truer reality—in writing. "Writing was entering the fog," she says, "feeling my way for a route from this world to the unearthly world of words, a route easier to find on some days than others" (12).

Throughout the course of the story, we find that our narrator was herself the victim of rape, and that when her brother tried to defend her by stabbing the would-be rapist with a short knife, he had his skull smashed with the butt of a gun. "I looked to the sky and saw the smoldering tip of God's cigarette," our nameless narrator reflects about that moment, "poised in the heavens the moment before it was pressed against my skin" (16).

This vivid memory unfolds in a suburban Californian house at night, years later, when the ghost of the unnamed ghostwriter's brother visits, having finally swum the whole ocean to find his sister and mother. The siblings converse about the fact that the wounds on his head haven't healed, that hers haven't either.

All of life is a ghost story perhaps, as the narrator seems to decide by the end, approaching her editor with the idea for her own stories—ghost stories that help us get through a world too often in a fog. “Stories are just things we fabricate, nothing more,” she reflects. “We search for them in a world besides our own, then leave them here to be found, garments shed by ghosts” (21).

But the book is not just about trauma; it's about a full of the range of human emotions from love to jealousy to paralysis to humor.

One of the funniest stories follows Arthur Arellano, a regular accountant at his family's landscaping business, Arellano and Sons. Arthur's gambling problem meant the family business passed to Arthur's younger brother, and it was only the sympathy created by Arthur's need for a liver transplant that convinced his wife to move back in with him. When Arthur accidentally receives a letter in the mail naming the donor, Men Vu, he feels compelled to follow up with the donor's children. First, though, Arthur tries to figure out just what kind of name Men Vu is. Though his wife suggests that the name is Korean or Japanese, we're told, “For his part, Arthur had no idea. He had trouble distinguishing one nationality of Asian names from another. He was also afflicted with a related, and very common, astigmatism wherein all Asians appeared the same” (80). Though a typical stereotype, the way it comes from Arthur's private thoughts makes us laugh anew—at ourselves, at Arthur's cognitive miserliness, at the flattening effect of his lack of discernment.

It's pretty clear that Louis Vu is using Arthur, courting him with expensive gourmet meals and philosophical discourses on the nature of capitalism, all while stashing his knockoff Chanel, Versace, and Givenchy goods in Arthur's garage. When Arthur finally encounters the *real* son of Men Vu, Louis blackmails him, threatening to rat on Arellano and Son's use of illegal immigrant labor. Louis, slime-ball chameleon con-artist, is a character Arthur can't leave alone—a particular

type of American hero-villain we all recognize.

Through all of the experiences his “refugees” face, Nguyen won't let them—or any of us—leave behind what's supposedly been left behind. Baggage and history come with any move, and Nguyen's characters illustrate that clearly.

There's the anti-communist mother who blackmails the owner of a Vietnamese grocery store, continuing the work her sons and husband were lost to, refusing to believe that all of them are dead.

There's the Vietnamese man who was separated from his first family—they left for America while he was trapped behind the closing borders—and so has a second family, giving the new children the exact same names as he gave to those in his first family. When a daughter from the first family visits, we are left pondering identity across cultures and classes and questionable fathers.

Or there's the legacy of war brought to the surface in “The Americans,” in which James Carver goes to visit his daughter in Vietnam, the country he bombed from thousands of feet up, where she now teaches English. “The Americans” is a special sort of gag on the idea of “melting pot.” Carver is black, his wife Michiko is Japanese, and his daughter Claire, a Bryn Mawr alum, who now tells him, “I have a Vietnamese soul.” Claire's boyfriend, Khoi Legaspi, we're told vaguely, is probably of South Asian origin.

In Vietnam, things have come full circle—except there's no circle. Claire and Khoi take Carver and Michiko to see a field trial of the simple robots that Khoi's been developing to safely find unexploded ordnance—some of the bombs that Carver helped sow. Carver, of course, sees things a little differently than his daughter and her boyfriend. “Some brilliant guy at a university working on a defense contract will figure out a way to put a landmine on this robot,” he says cynically. “Then the Pentagon will send it into a tunnel where a terrorist is hiding” (141). Claire calls him angry and bitter, and in response he marches off into a thunderstorm that drenches him, maybe cleanses him, but mostly puts him in the hospital with pneumonia. In the last scene, Nguyen offers one way that identity politics may find resolution, within the family, though that resolution, too, will be anything but simple or easy.

So there's trauma in Nguyen's stories, and there's humor and pathos and so many of the tan-

gles of race and family and politics and economy that we are all embroiled in every day—though it’s a mistake to think of *The Refugees* as anything but a human story.

I can’t say that my ancestors were quite refugees—landless and poor, even marginalized, but not exactly refugees. However, the burden of memory, the burden of forgetting, burdens of identity and re-forging identity, burdens of settling for jobs and love and even families that you must keep in order to survive but which are not the things you dreamed they would be, but going on despite all of these things—these are the realities that the stories of *The Refugees* make clear.

And it’s precisely the refugee with these kinds of burdens which, generation after generation, our world continues to make and which, generation after generation, our world will continue to en-

counter.

If you have somehow managed to avoid coverage of the current refugee crisis, or if you’ve become desensitized to its treatment in the news, I encourage you to watch one or more of the short documentaries that have been made about it. Daphne Matziaraki’s *4.1 Miles* is a good place to start.

Refugees are the way of the world. Even if we close our borders this time, there will be a next time. They will come, they are coming, they will continue to come. And as we, both the church and America, consider what it means to receive refugees, to help them on—not just to food and clothing and jobs in the short term, but to healing that will take a lifetime—it’s books like Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Refugees* that must be our primer.

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*Christian Economics in One Lesson*. North, Gary. Powder Springs, GA: American Vision Press, 2016. 241pp. ISBN: 978-0-9972402-1-4. Reviewed by Sacha Walicord, Associate Professor of Business Administration, Dordt College.

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“There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!” This well-known quote of the former prime minister of the Netherlands (1901-1905) and Reformed minister Abraham Kuyper is well known in our circles. It talks about the application of God’s Word to every single area of human existence. While most of us readily subscribe to these words, there seem to be areas of research in which we are quite inconsistent in applying God’s Word. In my view, economics is one of the underserved areas in this respect. It seems to be too closely connected to partisan-political issues and therefore off-limits for many Christian authors and worldview thinkers because political correctness has made a major inroad into the church of Jesus Christ. Out of such concerns, consistently biblical publications for areas like politics or economics remain rarities in our day and age. Even Abraham Kuyper remained inconsistent in applying biblical law and biblical economics in the Netherlands, an inconsistency that led to the democratic-welfare state in Holland.

Economist Gary North has tried to fill this gap over the last few decades with several publications to such an end, most famously his *Economic*

*Commentary on the Bible*,<sup>1</sup> which he makes available free of charge on the internet. Now, with his newest publication, *Christian Economics in One Lesson*, he has done something quite remarkable, namely he has re-written Henry Hazlitt’s 1946 libertarian classic *Economics in One Lesson*, a re-writing based on Biblical principles for a Christian audience. Of course, since economic theory and practice is so entangled with the state and its politics today, such a work cannot be written purely from an economic viewpoint but has to include a view of the role of government in society.

North uses Ray Sutton’s five-point biblical covenant model as a pattern to look at twenty-one applications of Frederic Bastiat’s economic parable of the Broken Window, which was a key economic fallacy addressed by Hazlitt in his aforementioned work. In Bastiat’s parable, a shopping window represents the free market. A vandal throws a stone into this window and breaks it. People gather around the broken window and reason that this act of destruction might not be such a bad thing. After all, the broken window provides new income for the glazier in replacing the window, who then spends his income somewhere else, which is good for the businesses where he spends his money, and