

Interview: Vincent Lam's 'The Headmaster's Wager' is a Different Kind of War Story | CultureMob

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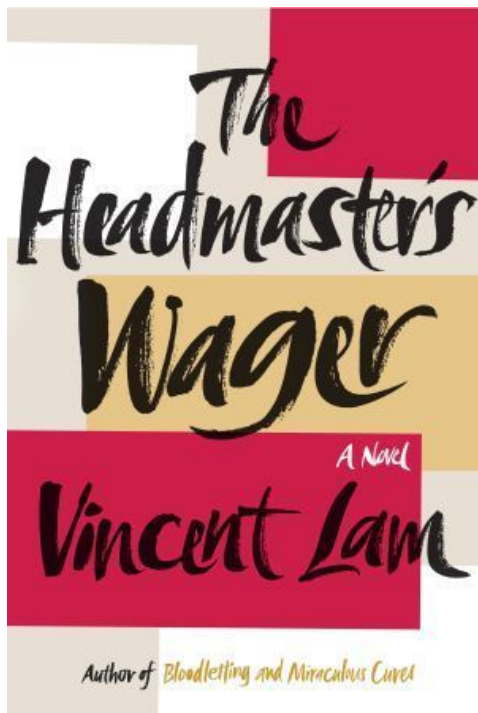
Interview: Vincent Lam's 'The Headmaster's Wager' is a Different Kind of War Story

by Gemma Alexander | 07/26/12 |

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A generation of American kids grew up in the shadow of Vietnam, the war America lost, watching men with guns jump out of helicopters every week in TV shows like *Tour of Duty*. Canadian Vincent Lam grew up listening to stories about the Vietnam War, too. But they weren't war stories. They were the family stories grandparents use to teach the next generation who they are. Lam's family belonged to the Chinese community in Vietnam.

Even as a teenager, Lam knew he wanted to write a novel about a character like his grandfather, an educator in wartime Vietnam. He also knew that before he could do it right, he needed experience – both in life and in writing. So he became a physician, then he wrote two nonfiction books and a short story collection that HBO Canada made into a miniseries before he completed *The Headmaster's Wager*.

Like the childhood stories that inspired the book, Lam's debut novel is about the Vietnam War from the perspective of the people who lived there. It is the story of Percival Chen, the respected headmaster of the best English academy in Saigon. Percival Chen uses his position to take advantage of the business opportunities that arise in wartime, and uses his wealth to indulge his weakness for women and gambling.

Lam portrays Chen with such compassion that the narrow-minded, short-sighted Chen remains likeable even as his actions destroy his loved ones. With a careful eye for detail, Lam so thoroughly embeds his protagonist in time and place that *The Headmaster's Wager* is as much about Vietnam as it is about Percival Chen. Falling short of expository, the novel packs in facts about this particular war, and explores the ways people survive in the face of violent upheaval, as well as issues of racial and family identity. With so many elements, Lam could easily have lost focus. But the all-too-human Chen grounds the story, and in doing so keeps the reader engaged to the very end.

We spoke to Vincent Lam about *The Headmaster's Wager* during his recent visit to Seattle.

Some highlights of the conversation follow.

Gemma Alexander: Before *The Headmaster's Wager*, you published two nonfiction books and a collection of short stories. How did that come about?

Vincent Lam: Really, in a core way, I'm a fiction writer. That's how I think of myself. I have the skills to do research and write nonfiction. The nonfiction projects came to me, and were things I thought should be said. But really, when it's just me in a dark room and the world fades away, I'm a fiction writer. The novel is this kind of bracket, a box that the rest slots inside. This is the idea that I had first. I took notes as teen, but I had no skills. Then I started writing eleven years ago when I finished my residency. I worked for a few months and realized I was unprepared for a novel. I was not confident. You know the old adage, "Write what you know," so I wrote a medical short story, and I got a sense that I should do linked short stories.

GA: How was the experience of writing a novel different?

VL: Not that nonfiction isn't hard work, but the scope of the project can be more controlled. Writing nonfiction, I just had this sense of, "Wow, I don't have to make this up. I can just go read about it, and think about how to say it." Fiction is just this cloud one enters and can do anything. But that's actually quite terrifying. It's all the writer, there is no source material, and at the end of the day, you have to do something very specific that, you hope, represents something broader and universal.

I started working in a concerted way on the novel in 2007. I knew how the novel would feel, who the protagonist was, and the setting – nothing else. I tried various plots, characters, voices. I tried third person and wanted to get closer. My intended remedy was first person. My editor warned me that was tricky. I rewrote it in first person, and they were right. I had to go back and rewrite it again. At one point I tried four voices, speaking in the present and in childhood and it was a mess. Around year four it all started to fall into place and the last year of writing was very satisfying. I was past wrestling it all into existence. I knew the characters and place and I just had to turn to them and ask.

GA: What did you do for research?

VL: Family stories provided the emotional basis. The really core ways I feel about Vietnam are from family stories, but they didn't provide facts.

Most of my research was reading. History, political commentary, lots of memoirs from the late 70s and 80s that don't stand as memoirs of literary importance, but share specific experiences. I gained an understanding of the actual political events from reading.

You need to know 10,000 things to write 100, at least for me. I don't know which details to write about until I know all the details. I went to Vietnam twice. I wanted to see certain places, get a sense of the rhythm of a day. There were lots of great things I experienced – not big things, the feel of the heat, the sound of rain. There was a lot I wanted to see, but it's already gone. The first time I went, I was immediately struck by the change. I needed a time machine! How can I get the story right? Ultimately it was liberating. The only way forward was to enter the story.

GA: There is a passage near the end of the book where Percival says that you can never go back.

VL: That is a lesson from the whole era. My family left all kinds of stuff behind. When Vietnam opened again, it was possible to reclaim some of that. There were costs attached, like paying those who used the property in the interim, and you had to renovate. My grandma thought about it and said, "No, I don't want it. We have a new life – why go back? Leave it behind." I thought that was absolutely the right answer. That idea came up in a lot of ways as I was growing up, as part of the family view of the world. We are here now and it's fine.

GA: Percival was based on your grandfather. How did he evolve from that starting point?

VL: I have a very strong personal connection to the story. The stories of my grandfather were parables growing up. He was, in many ways, an example, but he was also a warning. To me, that's more interesting than a saint. I feel as though I know Percival, and others in the story, as if they're people in my life. He is in some ways a figure I'm quite sympathetic towards, despite his flaws. I don't think he's an ill-meaning person. He fails to see a lot of things around him, and that's not so uncommon in any age. In fifty years, people will look at 2012 and say, "How could you not see that coming?" We can't see now. That's a big part of what happens to Percival, who looks through this Chinese lens that's even outdated for the Chinese. I don't think he's a bad person. He's flawed, yes; he succumbs to temptation, yes; he fails to see things around him. That's something we all do to some degree.

The characters all have something to do with the relationship of Asia and the West. I'm a banana – born in Canada, I see with Western eyes. There is a fascinating evolution right now in that East/West relationship, and in fifty years people will look at this era as an important changing point, politically and culturally.

GA: What's next?

VL: I am not writing right now. I'm busy with publishing. The book comes out in the U.S. on August 14th. Unbidden, some ideas are turning over in my head, but I'm not committed to any of them yet. I know that I don't want to spend my life rewriting the same book again and again.

The Headmaster's Wager is available in Canadian bookstores, where it is currently #10 on the Canada Bookseller's Association bestseller list. In the U.S., it can be preordered for \$25.00 from [Random House Publishing](#).



Vincent Lam photo by Barbara Stoneham