Stealing Buddha's Dinner
A Memoir
by Bich Minh Nguyen

About the Book

As a Vietnamese girl coming of age in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Bich Nguyen is filled with a rapacious hunger for American identity. In the pre-PC era Midwest, where the devoutly Christian blond-haired, blue-eyed Jennifers and Tiffanys reign supreme, Nguyen's barely conscious desire to belong transmutes into a passion for American food. More exotic seeming than her Buddhist grandmother's traditional specialties — spring rolls, delicate pancakes stuffed with meats, fried shrimp cakes — the campy, preservative-filled "delicacies" of mainstream America capture her imagination. And in this remarkable book, the glossy branded allure of such American foods as Pringles, Kit Kats, and Toll House cookies become an ingenious metaphor for her struggle to fit in, to become a "real" American.

Beginning with Nguyen's family's harrowing migration from Saigon in 1975, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* is nostalgic and candid, deeply satisfying and minutely observed, and stands as a unique vision of the immigrant experience and a lyrical ode to how identity is often shaped by the things we long for.

Praise for the Book

> "Relevant not only to anyone who's ever lusted after the perfect snack . . . but anyone who's ever felt like an outsider."
>
> — ***San Francisco Chronicle***

> "A charming memoir . . . Her prose is engaging, precise, compact."
>
> — ***The New York Times Book Review***

> "Her typical and not-so-typical childhood experiences give her story a universal flavor."
>
> — ***USA Today***

> "Only a truly gifted writer could make me long for the Kool-Aid, Rice-A-Roni, and Kit Kats celebrated in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*. In this charming, funny, original memoir about growing up as an outsider in America, Bich Nguyen takes you on a journey you won't forget. I can hardly wait for what comes next."
>
> **— Judy Blume**

Courtesy of Penguin Books

About the Author

Bich Minh Nguyen's first book, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (Viking Penguin, February 2007), received the PEN/Jerard Award from the PEN American Center. Her work has also appeared in publications such as *Gourmet* magazine; *Jane* magazine*; Dream Me Home Safely: Writers on Growing up in America*; and *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose*. She also coedited three anthologies: *30/30: Thirty American Stories from the Last Thirty Years* (Penguin Academic); *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: I & Eye* (Longman); and *The Contemporary American Short Story* (Longman). She is currently at work on a novel, *Short Girls*.

Nguyen was born in Saigon in 1974. On April 29, 1975, the night before the city fell, her family fled Viet Nam by ship. After staying in refugee camps in Guam and at Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, they settled in the conservative, mostly white town of Grand Rapids, Michigan. In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* Nguyen writes about growing up in a Vietnamese household in an "All-American" city in the deep 1980s.

She received an MFA in creative writing from the University of Michigan and currently teaches creative nonfiction, fiction, and Asian American Literature at Purdue University. She lives in Chicago and West Lafayette, Indiana with her husband Porter Shreve.

Nguyen's first name, Bich, is pronounced like "Bit." Nguyen, the Smith of Viet Nam, is pronounced something like Ngoo-ee-ehn (said quickly, as in one syllable), but most people tend to say "Win" or "New-in" instead.

Courtesy of http://www.bichminhnguyen.com

Author Interview

Q: How did you choose the title *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*?

Bich Minh Nguyen: One of the most enduring symbols of my childhood is my grandmother's bronze statue of Buddha. He sat on a high shelf in her room, surrounded by candles, incense, and offerings of fruit and food, and he seemed such a powerful yet calming figure. I liked the idea of being Buddhist, but at the same time I recognized that it was considered — during the early to mid-1980s in Grand Rapids — not just anomalous but wayward and weird. It was such a strange contrast to play outside with girls who cheerfully asked me if I knew I was going to hell, then return home to the sanctuary of my grandmother's room. Buddha played a role in the decision I felt I had to make between maintaining Vietnamese identity and assimilating into white identity. I felt stuck in between, so the effort to claim a culture, whether American or Vietnamese, felt to me like a theft, like a taking of something that didn't or never really would belong to me. The title chapter of *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* illustrates the origin of the title; there came a day when, troubled by ideas of spirituality, I attempted the unthinkable: taking some of Buddha's offerings for myself.

Q: You spent a lot of time at the library as a child, but did you always want to be a writer? Which writers have most influenced your writing? What occupations did you dream of having as a child?

BMN: Like most writers, I dreamed of writing because I loved reading. I loved falling into someone else's imagined world and getting carried forward within his or her language and narrative. At first wanting to write stemmed from wanting to emulate the writers I admired, such as Louise Fitzhugh (*Harriet the Spy*) and Beverly Cleary (the Ramona Quimby books), and later, Dickens and Austen and Hardy. Writing also felt like an enormous kind of freedom. In real life I was so shy I sometimes couldn't answer when someone asked me a question; in the imagined life I could speak through writing. I could be as close to fearless as I dared.

I was also intensely interested in language. While I didn't know it consciously at the time, I'm sure that part of my obsession with reading, writing, spelling, and language was connected to my need to learn English — to master it. I probably felt that I had to prove that I could be as good at English as anyone else. It was my way of dealing with my self-consciousness as a "foreigner." I vowed I would "deforeignize" myself through English. When I was in second or third grade someone gave me a scrapbook called "School Days." It had pockets to keep report cards and drawings, pages to record the highlights of one's grade-school years, and fill-in-the blanks: "My favorite subject is _____"; "My best friend is _____." Then: "When I grow I want to be _____," followed by different options for boys and girls. For boys: doctor, fireman, astronaut. For girls: nurse, teacher, secretary. I would choose secretary because it involved a typewriter, and because it seemed, laid out so, a logical career choice. What I really wanted — to be a writer — seemed so ambitious as to invite ridicule. So I kept it a secret. There was also a big part

of me that wondered why anyone would care what I had to say. For years I wrote stories, poems, and "novels" that basically mimicked whatever I was reading — often, British literature. I didn't discover books by Asian American writers (and it never occurred to me to write about being Vietnamese) until I got to college and read Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Then, slowly, possibilities unfolded in my mind. I started writing first-person stories not from the point of view of a white girl — my usual protagonist up to that point — but of a Vietnamese girl. It felt scary and audacious but also somehow right.

Q: *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* is your first book. Why did you start with a memoir? What was it like to have your first book win the 2005 PEN/Jerard Award?

BMN: I found I could write in the nonfiction form what I could never seem to articulate fully in fiction or poetry: how my family fled Vietnam on April 29, 1975, and how we left my mother behind in our flight; how we settled in, slowly, to life among tall people in Grand Rapids; how my father came home with feathers in his hair after shifts at the feather factory where he worked; how my new Latina stepmother and stepsister changed all of our lives. I didn't want, after all, to hide this story in fiction or poetry. In order to write it I had to acknowledge it as the truth — or my truth, the truth as I knew and had experienced it. I'm also interested in the shape a memoir can take. It doesn't have to be confessional and full of trauma (a persistent misconception, I think). Rather, it can be a collusion of ideas and personal history, a meditation on memory and metaphor. That's what I was aiming for in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*.

Winning the PEN/Jerard was flat-out one of the best things that ever happened to me. It gave me the encouragement I needed to keep writing, and it allowed me to think about creating not just manuscript pages but an actual book. I am extremely grateful to the PEN American Center for their support.

Q: Do you think it's easier for Asian immigrants to be free to be themselves now that there are Asian restaurants everywhere and Asian characters are featured on many prime-time TV shows? How do you think your experience might have been different if you had grown up in Boston or Los Angeles?

BMN: As an Asian American in Grand Rapids, my childhood was defined by a feeling of isolation. I'm technically first generation, but my experiences were that of the second generation. So I guess I'm somewhere in between; I didn't have the older generation's connection to Vietnam, its language and culture, but I did have the immigrant's feelings of uncertainty and hyper-self-awareness that come with living in a predominately white city. I'm not sure I would have felt any of this so keenly had I grown up in, say, Little Saigon in southern California, or the West Coast cities that saw the birth of Asian American studies. Or maybe I would have. Did my sense of outsiderness lead me to writing, or was that feeling innate? Writers are always writing from the outside; they are witnesses and observers; they are never really "in." In a way, growing up where I did

helped me develop as a writer. It kept me in a state of consistent discomfort. It kept me watchful and aware and wondering.

It does seem easier now for Asian immigrants to be themselves; a good deal of progress has been made since the early 1980s. At the same time I think the negative idea of the "foreigner" still persists — not just for Asian immigrants, but for many nonwhite immigrants and their descendants, people who continue to be asked: "Where are you from? I mean, where are you really from?" And while there are a lot more Asian Americans in the media now, some are still depicted in stereotypical ways, or as so-called comic characters with exaggerated accents. Still, hope and complexity are stronger than ever: in more diverse casts on TV shows; in literature, such as Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake* and Vincent Lam's *Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures*; and in movies like *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*. Here the main characters, a Korean American and an Indian American, play on, turn around, and comment on stereotypes. It's a long way from Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles*.

Q: In the book you describe the hurt you endured from adults and children because of your name, Bich (pronounced "Bit"). Did you ever consider changing your name once you became an adult? Do you believe that childhood difficulties help build character? Would you give your children American or Vietnamese names?

BMN: I've thought about changing my name many times. I used to try out new names with restaurant reservations, or at any place that called out "Order for X" over a loudspeaker. I've been Lucy, Julia, Alice, and all the girls' names from *Little Women*. Sensible, pretty, straightforward, no-way-to-mispronounce names. None of them ever sounded right, though; I felt like I was in hiding. Which I was. I believe that names have great power — that more than just marking us, they are part of our identities. I deal with this idea in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* through the insistence on name brands. Words like Pringles, McDonald's, and Izod connote and generate impressions, memories, and contexts. They insist on their exactness, and no generic term will do. The funny thing is that I don't really like the name Bich as a Vietnamese name. And I think I probably would have had an easier life, at the very least during roll call, if I'd gone by Beth or Meg or Jo. But my name — the difficulty of it, the burden of it — is a part of me and a part of my story. I'm still learning to be okay with that. I figured, too, that if I was going to proceed with a nonfiction book, I should very well use my real, given name.
I do think that childhood difficulties can help build character through heightened sensitivity and awareness. Which is why if I have a child I plan to saddle him/her with an "American" name, a Vietnamese name, *and* a hyphenated last name!

Q: Now that you are an adult, do those candies and brand-name processed foods still appeal to you? Were you able to learn how to cook Vietnamese foods from Noi?

BMN: When I was a kid, candy and processed foods appealed to me on a very earnest level. They offered both literal and metaphorical nourishment in that they satisfied

desires for access. If I could eat what normal Americans were eating then I could be one of them. It's disturbing and comic to think about how misguided I was — how much I longed for erasure and transformation.

I'm happy to report that my tastes and desires have evolved since that time. I still love candy, but now I mostly look for things like single-origin chocolates and handmade sweets (though, I confess, a box of Nerds once in a great while is very satisfying). The boxed and processed foods of my youth appeal to me now on a camp level; they have become symbols and ideas, signposts of a former time, place, and identity. When I was writing *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* I even ate Chef Boyardee and Jeno's frozen pizza (since renamed) as a way to cull memories and meditations. Such foods, for me, are inextricable from their context — their role in my eighties childhood.

I have learned from Noi how to cook some Vietnamese foods, like *cha gio* and *pho*. I crave these dishes now, but somehow they never seem to turn out exactly the same, or nearly as good, when I'm on my own.

Q: *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* is steeped in 1980s culture — TV, music, fashion. What do you think it means to have grown up in the eighties? Do you still listen to eighties music?

BMN: It's embarrassing to admit, but I really did buy into the pop culture and commercialism of the time. All the songs, television shows, and foods in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* are there to show the context in which I sought an identity. They were the identity I wanted. To help me remember that I listened to a lot of eighties music while writing this book. Journey, Cyndi Lauper, Prince — the songs called forth endless memories, like how I used to wait for the school bus at the corner of the street and sing at the top of my lungs. The songs also revealed the ethos of the time. If the music of the sixties and seventies emerged from times of political and economic struggle, the music of the eighties emerged from a time of intense materialism. This resulted in a lot of truly awful songs. But at the same time, I think there's a grappling with identity politics, such as sexuality, going on behind the materialism. This kind of mixed message helped define my eighties experience.

Today I can still appreciate the good badness of the eighties: Lionel Richie, *Back to the Future, The Facts of Life*. Back when the Whopper beat the Big Mac, when music videos were heartfelt and narrative. It was an era of confusion: excess and indulgence and synthesizers backlit by the Cold War and the rise of multiculturalism. It was a bad-fashion, teased-hair decade in which to grow up, but it did teach me something about irony and complication. The eighties were my first (if perverse) lesson in aesthetics, and in how notions of taste and beauty can be entirely culturally constructed.

Q: In the book you illustrate the many fantasies that you had as a child about what you imagined American family life was, and the disappointment you felt when you learned the truth. What had you dreamed about your mother and the life you might have led had you stayed with her instead of your father?

BMN: When I was growing up much of the world seemed steeped in mystery. The minor mysteries — how exactly did Pringles get their shape? — weighed almost as much as the major mysteries — what had happened to my mother? The subject of her life was shrouded in secrecy — no one in the family wanted, or dared, to talk about her — and in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* I try to re-create that sense of silence. The structure of the book mirrors my experience of not knowing, and not even really allowing myself to think about her. She was an off-limits subject, and I not only bowed to that, I was a part of that pact. It sounds awful, but the reality was that I had never known her; I didn't know anything about her. And since I had a mother, Rosa, in my life, and my grandmother Noi, I wasn't lacking maternal figures. When I fantasized about having the perfect family, I dreamed of mothers I could not have, like Marmee March or Maria Von Trapp. They represented, or so I often thought, lives of perfection. In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* the truth about my mother is not revealed until near the end — again, the narrative structure reflecting my experience — when, no longer a child, I face the mother I had all along feared to know.

Q: Though you dreamed of Manhattan, Boston, and Los Angeles as a child, you have remained in the Midwest. Did you ever try living in any of those places? Have you reconciled the "missingness" you felt as a child? Do you identify yourself as a Midwesterner?

BMN: I'm a Midwesterner and a Michigander. While I love being in New York and Los Angeles, I've mostly lived in the Midwest. What people from the Midwest have in common — though I don't mean to generalize, since the area is quite vast, and living in Grand Rapids, for instance, is very different from living in Chicago — is a kind of understanding of landscape and middleness. We are aware, we are made to be aware, that we are far from both coasts; we are "flyover" country. That can forge a kind of kinship between someone from Illinois and someone from Ohio. It can also create a sense of longing and restlessness that, when spotted in someone else, becomes an avenue for discussion. I remember in high school being thrilled to learn that F. Scott Fitzgerald was a Midwesterner. *Gatsby* made a lot of sense to me.

The missingness I felt as a child was part of my larger desire not to be lonely. I didn't know that then. I thought it was simply about location, as if being in a bustling city would guarantee friendships. Now I know that loneliness crosses all regions, and that one can be just as terribly alone in a crowd of people walking the same sidewalk. So in a sense I guess you could say I've reconciled that sense of missingness in that I understand it better now. I also think it's important, especially as a writer, to follow that missingness and see where it leads.

Q: Since leaving Grand Rapids for college, grad school, and professional life have you met children of immigrants with similar childhood experiences? Because you grew up in such a unique household, do you find it difficult to identify with Asian American diaspora groups? You teach a course on Asian American literature — does your work qualify as Asian American literature, and do you identify yourself as an Asian American writer?

BMN: I've met many immigrants and children of immigrants who have had similar childhood struggles with assimilation, identity, and outsiderness. I've also met many nonimmigrants, people whose families have been here since the Pilgrims, with the same feelings. The territory of childhood is so often unkind — brutal, even. My story may be rooted in Asian American-ness, but issues of loneliness and longing certainly don't belong exclusively to the Asian American experience.

Being Asian American is a part of my work and my identity, so in that way I do think my work can be considered Asian American literature, which often deals with issues of immigration, diaspora, stereotypes, and identity. At the same time, I would resist being pigeonholed as "only" Asian American. I identify myself as a writer *and* as an Asian American writer.

Q: What are you working on now?

BMN: I'm finishing a novel, titled *Short Girls*. It revolves around two sisters, Linny and Van, who are dealing with troubled love lives (one is involved with a married man; the other is trying to cover up the fact that her husband has left her), and their own unstable family. Through these complicated relationships, the novel explores what it means to be short in a tall world — to be sometimes overlooked, for instance, or simply to feel overlooked. Of course, the sisters are short, and so is their father, a failed inventor of products to improve the lives of short people. They have to come to terms with things they cannot change — their face, race, family, and height, and in so doing try to make progress in a world that often feels out of reach.

Writing fiction after writing nonfiction has been very freeing. I keep thinking: I get to make stuff up! It's also freeing to have told my real story in nonfiction — it's as though I had to tell the truth in order to allow myself really to write fiction. I've always enjoyed working in more than one genre and thinking about places where one genre bends toward another. I have found, for myself, that subject matter is the primary element that decides which genre a work is going to veer toward. *Short Girls* does draw on what I know in that it's mostly set in Michigan and depicts characters who are Vietnamese, but that's pretty much where the autobiographical involvement ends. Well, except for the title.

Courtesy of Penguin Books

Discussion Questions

1. The narrator uses food as a metaphor for cultural identity. How effective is this metaphor? What kinds of foods does the narrator describe to define who she and her family are? What kinds of foods does she describe to define who she wishes to be? Can any person be defined by what they eat and what they long to eat? How much can a person's diet reveal about who they are?

2. Some argue that immigrants should assimilate themselves entirely into American culture, while others believe it is important to preserve the cultural heritage of the country they originate from. Which Vietnamese cultural customs does the narrator hold onto? Which American customs does the narrator embrace? What are the difficulties of straddling two very different cultures? What issues of cultural identity are specific to the immigrant in America?

3. The narrator's father uproots their family to escape a life of destitution under the postwar communist regime in Vietnam. But when confronted with limitless choice in the land of plenty, the young narrator and her sister Anh only yearn for what they cannot have, hardly able to appreciate what little they would have had had they not left for America. How might their aspirations have been different if they had not escaped communist Vietnam? Is this materialistic yearning the flip side of "freedom of choice"?

4. The narrator embraces American consumer culture, yearning for brand-name foods and the lifestyles associated with them. Have advertising and marketing campaigns shaped her American dream? Can you think of instances in your own childhood where you believed, perhaps naively, that a product could give you a lifestyle you wanted?

5. The narrator describes her obsession with the *Little House on the Prairie* series of books, saying, "In a way, it makes sense that I would become enamored with a literature so symbolic of manifest destiny and white entitlement." Why does it make sense that she would embrace *Little House on the Prairie*? What do the Ingalls represent to the young narrator? What does the Ingalls family fantasy provide to her that her family life does not?

6. Why do the narrator and her sister, Anh, break into the Vander Wals' home and wreck Jennifer Vander Wal's room? How do Jennifer Vander Wal's pious superiority and the narrator's resentful friendship reflect relations between Americans and Vietnamese refugees at that time?

7. Rosa, the narrator's stepmother, teaches her stepchildren to embrace their Vietnamese heritage and tries to integrate herself into the local Vietnamese community, which often emphasizes the cultural differences between Rosa and her adopted family. Why does Rosa try so hard to embrace Vietnamese culture? Was her method the best way to unify a mixed-culture family?

8. On the few occasions in which the narrator is finally allowed to indulge in the foods she's idealized — Kraft Macaroni and Cheese after she has an argument with Rosa, a pork-chop dinner at her friend Holly's house — she finds herself disappointed by their flavors. How is this mirrored in the accompanying personal experiences?

9. The music references in the book are almost as rich and evocative as the food imagery. Is music more or less personal than food? Given that music is purely sensory pleasure while food is a necessity that can also be a sensory pleasure, what do you make of their impacts on culture? Which has had more of an impact in your own life?

10. How has the immigrant's status changed since Nguyen's family came to America? What was unique about the immigration situation for Vietnamese refugees? Which of the narrator's experiences — harrowing escape, immigrant sponsorship, religious condescension, etc. — could have happened today? Which experiences would be different?

11. What does the book reveal about ideas on motherhood and matriarchy? Why does Nguyen structure her book so that the revelations about her birth mother are not revealed until "Mooncakes"? How do themes of motherhood in the book reflect tensions between the immigrant and her mother country?

Courtesy of Penguin Books