The background features a warm, orange-to-red gradient sky over a range of green mountains. A large, dark, gnarled branch extends across the top. A large, intricate, golden, leaf-like structure with fine, parallel lines is positioned on the left side, partially overlapping the mountains. The title 'THE MOUNTAINS SING' is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the center.

THE  
MOUNTAINS  
SING

BOOK  
CLUB KIT



A NOVEL

A smaller version of the golden, leaf-like structure is positioned on a dark branch in the lower-left quadrant, mirroring the larger one above.

NGUYỄN PHAN QUẾ MAI



**WOULD YOU LIKE TO HOST  
NGUYỄN PHAN QUẾ MAI AT  
YOUR BOOK CLUB?**

Quế Mai is offering free Skype author events for groups of 8 or more who read her novel before December 2020.

To arrange a Skype session with your book club, bookstore, library, or classroom, please visit [www.nguyenphanquemai.com](http://www.nguyenphanquemai.com).



Dear Readers,

**I**t took me seven years, hundreds of revisions, many sleepless nights, tears . . . and finally *The Mountains Sing* is here. I am so thankful to you, my precious readers, for the gift of your time—time that you will spend, or have spent, with the Trần family in my novel.

Grandma Diệu Lan in *The Mountains Sing* is the grandmother I always wished for. Both my grandmothers had died before I was born, and I wanted to have a grandma who would sing me lullabies and tell me the legends and tales of my village, as well as teach me what I needed to know about my family's history. Now, holding the book in my hands, I feel that I truly have a grandma.

Hương embodies my own experiences growing up in Việt Nam and witnessing the war's devastating effects. But more than that, she represents a generation of Vietnamese who have no choice but to inherit the trauma of war brought home by returning soldiers.

While this novel embraces some of my family's stories, I interviewed hundreds of people and fictionalized their stories into *The Mountains Sing*. I read hundreds of fiction and nonfiction books about Việt Nam that helped me gain a deep understanding of our turbulent history.

While I have published eight books of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction in the Vietnamese language, I consider *The Mountains Sing* my most personal work to date. It is my desperate call for peace and for humans to love other human beings more. In the words of Hương: "Somehow I was sure that if people were willing to read each other, and see the light of other cultures, there would be no war on earth."

I hope that the diacritical marks that accompany the Vietnamese names and words in *The Mountains Sing* don't interfere with your reading experience. Those marks might look strange at first, but they are as important as the roof of a home. The word "ma," for example, can be written as ma, má, mà, mả, mạ, mã; each meaning very different things: ghost, mother, but, grave, young rice plant, horse. The word "bo" can become bó, bở, bọ, bơ, bở, bờ, bô, bở, bỗ, bỗ (bunch, abandon, insect, butter, mushy, shore, chamber pot, father, mistress, nutritious). By reading *The Mountains Sing*, you already show your acceptance and appreciation of my mother tongue's beauty and complexity. Thank you!

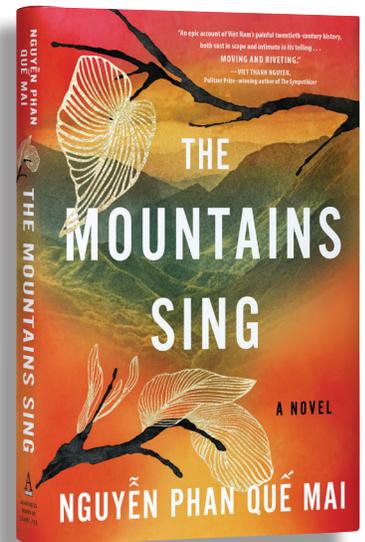
I didn't have a chance to learn English until the eighth grade, so penning this epic account of Việt Nam's twentieth-century history in English felt like climbing a tall mountain barefoot. But I climbed with my pen in one hand and my Vietnamese-English dictionary in another. I climbed while reading English novels voraciously, learning new words every day so that these words would enter the realm of my unconsciousness. Thank you for joining me on this journey.

I am imagining you holding my book in your hands and I am filled with joy and gratefulness. I can't wait to hear your feedback.

With warmest wishes,

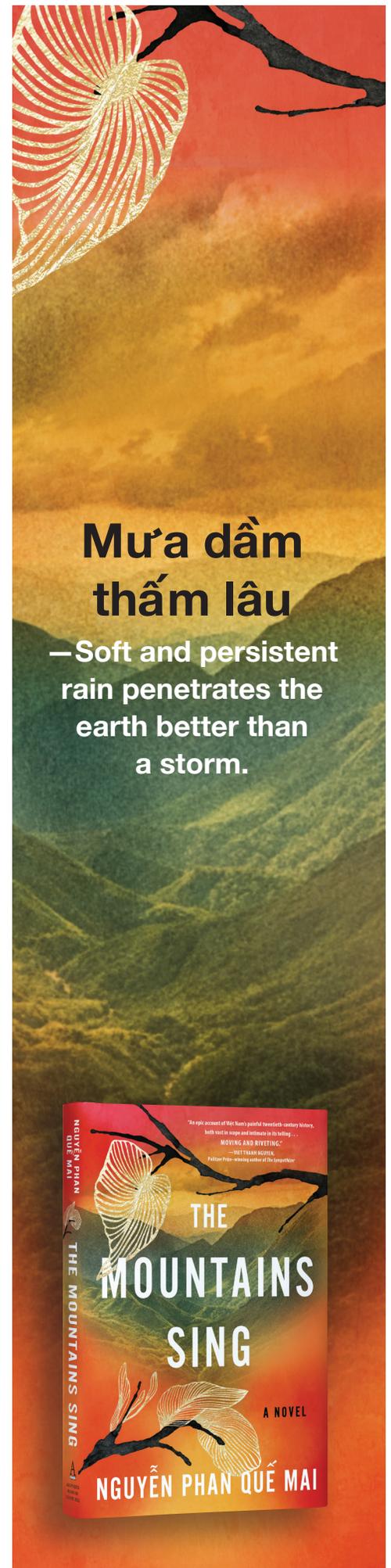
  
Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai

P.S. I have included some of my favorite Vietnamese proverbs throughout. I hope you find them as inspirational as I do.



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There are many major historical events featured in the novel. How much did you know about these events before you read *The Mountains Sing*? Did the story show you a new side to any events you were already familiar with?
2. Many of the characters in *The Mountains Sing* experience terrible things, and some of them must make difficult choices. Each of them handles their experiences differently. The Sơn ca helps Hương on her journey. What other objects, memories, people, or conversations help each character to endure and recover?
3. How does Grandma Diệu Lan help her children after their return? What might her relationships with her children reveal about family relationships in Việt Nam?
4. War stories are often told from a male perspective. In *The Mountains Sing*, Hương and Grandma Diệu Lan take turns narrating their stories. How might the novel differ if it had male narrators? Why do you think the author chose to have women and girls tell the story instead?
5. Which character did you feel the most sympathetic toward? The least? Is that different from which character you like the most and least, and if so, why?
6. “I was determined to sing on. I learned then that as long as I have my voice, I am still alive,” says Grandma Diệu Lan. Give examples of music and poetry that are represented in the novel. How important do you think music and poetry are in the Vietnamese culture? How important are they in your own culture?
7. In addition to descriptions of war and pain, *The Mountains Sing* features many descriptions of gorgeous landscapes, interesting city sights, and delicious foods. Were there any locations that you would like to visit or have visited? Any foods you would like to try or have tried?
8. According to Hương, proverbs are the essence of Vietnamese wisdom, passed orally from one generation to the next, even before the written Vietnamese language existed. Two examples are Trong cái rủi có cái may (Good luck hides inside bad luck) and Ác giả ác báo (Cruelty dispensed, cruelty returned). Do these proverbs ring true for you? Were there other proverbs that resonated with you as particularly true or meaningful?
9. In *The Mountains Sing*, Vietnamese names and words appear with their full diacritical marks. For Vietnamese speakers, these marks are necessary to interpret meaning: for example, the words ma, mã, má, mà, mạ, and mã all have separate meanings (ghost, grave, mother, but, young rice plant, and horse, respectively). Nonetheless, it is unusual for an American novel to include the marks. Did their inclusion affect your reading experience? How?
10. Hương thinks that if people are willing to learn about other cultures, there will be no war on earth. Do you think Hương feels differently about America and American people because of her reading? What books have made your world bigger?
11. Grandma says, “If our stories survive, we will not die, even when our bodies are no longer here on this earth.” *The Mountains Sing* is inspired by some of the experiences of the author’s family. What stories from your own family can be written into a novel? Do you know of any fictional stories that remind you of your own family story?
12. Had you previously read other books from or about Việt Nam? How is the Việt Nam portrayed in *The Mountains Sing* similar to or different from the Việt Nam you already knew?



## Mưa dầm thấm lâu

—Soft and persistent  
rain penetrates the  
earth better than  
a storm.

# CLIMBING MANY MOUNTAINS

An essay by Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai

**IN 1983, WHEN I WAS TEN YEARS OLD,** I went secretly to the post office in my hometown to mail a letter to Hà Nội. The letter contained my entry for a writing competition. When a notice arrived announcing that I had won a prize, my parents were shocked. Due to the long history of Vietnamese writers' experiences in my country, my parents reminded me of their wish that their only daughter would not become a writer.

Then I had to put aside my dreams of writing to do a variety of jobs to earn a living and help support my family. But the writer in me always listened to other people, always asked questions about their experiences during the war, and memorialized their stories. In my teenage years, I began to travel to my parents' villages to talk with our elder relatives and family friends so I could imagine how life had been for my grandparents, who had either died or been killed before I was born. Gradually, the more I began to understand Việt Nam's painful past, the more people shared with me the events of their lives.

Unbeknownst to me, at that young age I was already carrying out the research for *The Mountains Sing*. It was only with time and distance and my ongoing academic research that I could comprehend the complexity of Việt Nam's history and its relation to other nations. My extensive exchanges with Vietnamese and American combat veterans, as well as volunteer work with victims of the war, has expanded this understanding.

*The Mountains Sing* embodies my yearning to know my grandmothers, and to bring to life the underrepresented women and children who often suffer the consequences of wars the most but must hide their sorrows to become pillars of strength and comfort for returning soldiers. Through Grandma Diệu Lan and her granddaughter Hương in the novel, I could talk to them, trace their footsteps,

and imagine their dreams and hopes.

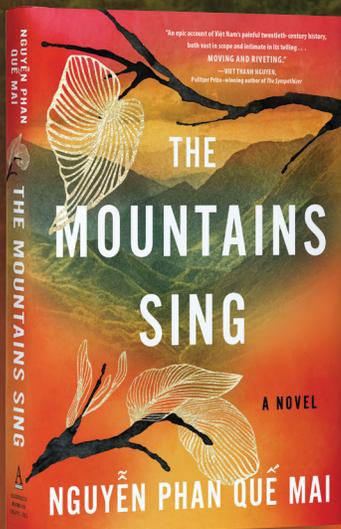
It may seem ironic that I have chosen to write this novel, by far my most personal work to date, in English, which is also the language of invasive military powers and cultures. But this language has given me a new voice and a way to fictionalize the turbulent events of my country's past, including those that have not yet been sufficiently documented in Vietnamese fiction, such as the Great Hunger or the Land Reform. I am also responding to Hollywood movies and novels written by those Westerners who continue to see our country only as a place of war and the Vietnamese as people who don't need to speak—or, when we do, sound simple, naïve, cruel, or opportunistic. The canon of Việt Nam war and post-war literature in English is vast, but there is a lack of voices from inside Việt Nam.

**It was only with time and distance and my ongoing academic research that I could comprehend the complexity of Việt Nam's history and its relation to other nations.**

When I first learned English in eighth grade, I didn't know that one day it would be the language that would save *The Mountains Sing*. Kường Dụ, the small northern village where I was born, did not have an English teacher. Bạc Liêu, the southern town where I grew up, didn't have many people who could speak English. For me, a student who also worked as a rice farmer and street vendor, the Western world was mysterious, existing only in the black-and-white movies I would occasionally catch a glimpse

**Có công mài  
sắt có ngày  
nên kim**

**—Perseverance  
grinds iron  
into needles.**



of while selling cigarettes in the town's cemetery, which also served as our only open-air movie theater.

I didn't know any English words until well into secondary school, when one afternoon my eldest brother brought home a notebook. He told me he had just learned English from someone and would teach me. I was so excited I could barely swallow my dinner. That night, after I had lit the oil lamp (we had electricity only occasionally) and put on long pants and a long-sleeved shirt to ward off the zillions of mosquitoes, my brother solemnly brought out his notebook. He opened the first page and pointed at a strange-looking word. "Sờ cu lờ," he said, and then looked at me, expecting me to repeat after him.

"Sờ . . . sờ . . ." I said, and brought my hand to my mouth.

"Sờ cu lờ," he said again.

"Sờ . . . sờ cu . . ." I repeated and burst out laughing. I couldn't help it! The words that had just escaped my mouth sounded like the Vietnamese phrase for "to touch a male's genitals."

So ended my first English lesson. Because I hadn't been able to stop laughing, my brother slapped his notebook shut and stormed out of the room. His face was as red as a gấc fruit.

"Brother! Teach me, please," I called after him, but he didn't turn back.

Later, much later, I found out my brother was trying to teach me a very important word: "school."

I didn't dare ask him to teach me again, but occasionally I would steal his notebook when he was gone, hide under the mango and coconut trees that circled our fish pond, and stare at the English words. I sensed that behind those strange-looking words existed some magic doors, and if I managed to push them open, I would be able to enter the big, wide world.

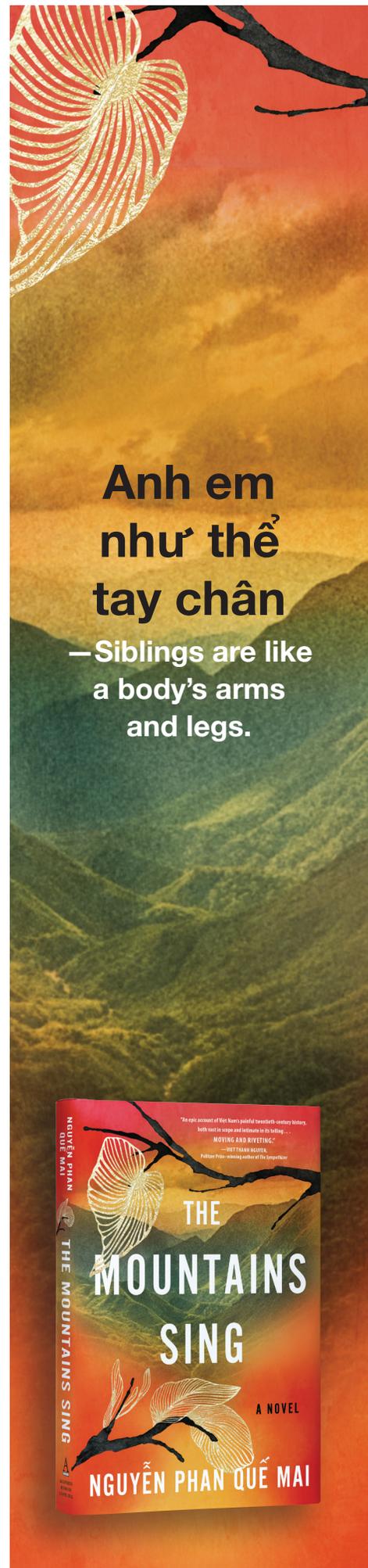
And now, with *The Mountains Sing*, I am taking my baby steps into that world. It took me seven years to write and edit, hundreds of revisions, many sleepless nights, tears, and countless moments

of doubt. I doubted that I was a good-enough storyteller. I doubted my ability to express complicated thoughts and emotions in English. But I never doubted my decision in 2006 at the age of thirty-three to return to my dream of becoming a writer.

Just like Hương in *The Mountains Sing*, for several of my childhood years, books were my only friends; they allowed me to escape from desperation and poverty. My family had moved from the north to the south of Việt Nam; it was just a few years after the war, and despite the country's unification, the north-south tension ran strong. While living amidst this tension I understood the deep wounds that divided our country and families. Many of these wounds have still not healed, even though nearly forty-five years have passed since the war's ending on April 30, 1975.

**I hope the story of  
Hương and Diệu Lan  
helps international  
readers discover our  
common humanity.**

Tremendous progress has been made in terms of reconciliation between Việt Nam and the United States, but the wounds that divided our country and families, both at home and in the diaspora, remain profound and painful. For that reason, *The Mountains Sing* places our people at the center of the Việt Nam War in the hopes that we will be open to difficult but necessary conversations that can help one another heal. And at the same time, I hope the story of Hương and Diệu Lan helps international readers discover our common humanity, as in the words of Hương: "Somehow I was sure that if people were willing to read each other, and see the light of other cultures, there would be no war on earth."

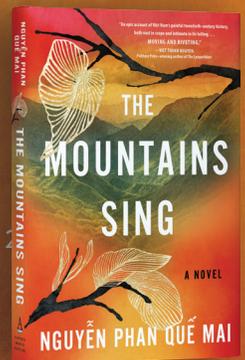


**Anh em  
như thể  
tay chân**

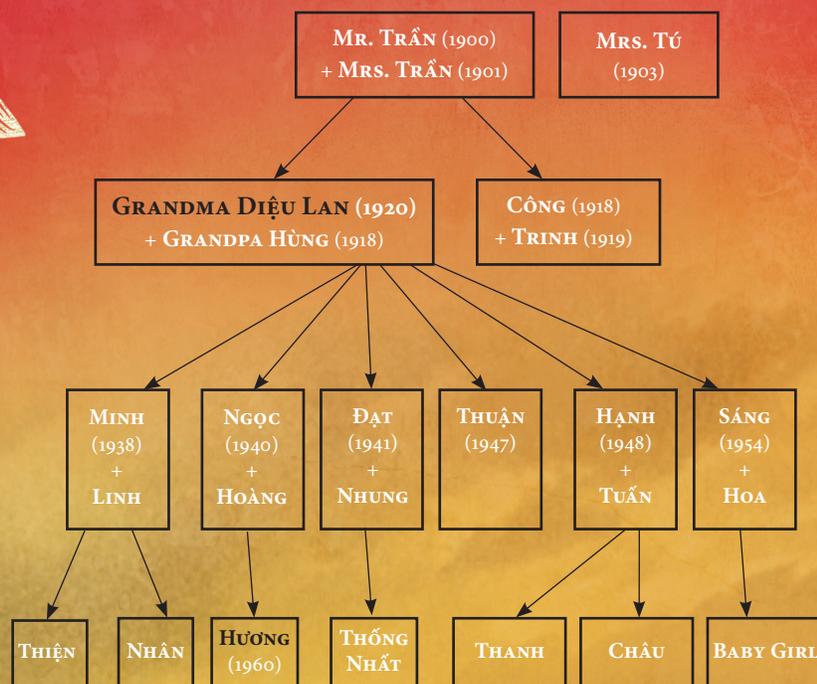
**—Siblings are like  
a body's arms  
and legs.**

# THE MOUNTAINS SING: A TIMELINE

How the Trần's story intersects with Vietnamese history



# THE TRẦN FAMILY TREE



## THE MUSIC OF VIỆT NAM

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai has curated this playlist of Vietnamese music to further welcome you to her homeland. The list represents some of her favorite artists and songs, including one inspired by her poetry. Head over to Spotify (<https://spoti.fi/2w1wXpB>) to listen to these songs and more!

**TỔ QUỐC GỌI TÊN MÌNH**, poetry by Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, music by Đinh Trung Cẩn, sung by Trọng Tấn

**NHƯ CÁNH VẠC BAY**, music and lyrics by Trịnh Công Sơn, sung by Hồng Nhung

**CHÈNH VÈNH**, music, lyrics, and sung by Lê Cát Trọng Lý

**ÁO LỤA HÀ ĐÔNG**, poetry by Nguyễn Sa, music by Ngô Thụy Miên, sung by Quang Dũng

**TIẾNG VIỆT**, poetry by Lưu Quang Vũ, music by Nguyễn Lê Tâm, sung by Ngô Hồng Quang

**KHÚC THỤY DU**, poetry by Du Tử Lê, music by Anh Bằng, sung by Quang Dũng

**SẮC MÀU**, music and lyrics by Trần Tiến, sung by Trần Thu Hà

**ÁO ANH SỨ T CHỈ ĐƯỜNG TÀ**, poetry by Hữu Loan, music by Phạm Duy, sung by Đức Tuấn

**NGẬM NGÙI**, poetry by Huy Cận, music by Phạm Duy, sung by Tùng Dương

**SUỐI MƠ**, music and lyrics by Văn Cao, sung by Mỹ Linh

