
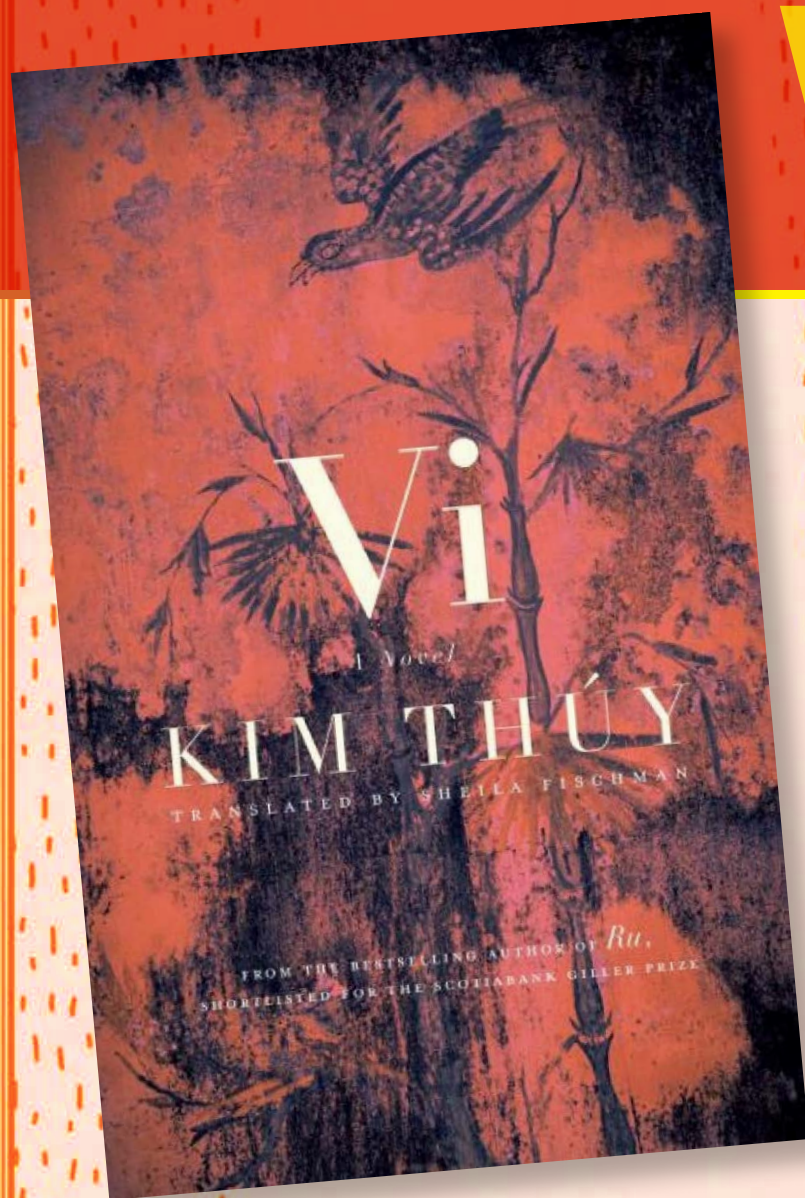


JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2019
DISCUSSION GUIDE



AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL 
BOOK CLUB
DISCUSSION
GUIDE



Vi BY **KIM THÚY**
RECOMMENDED BY OMAR EL AKKAD



WELCOME

AMNESTY BOOK CLUB MEMBERS

The Amnesty International Book Club is pleased to announce our January/February book *Vi* by Kim Thúy. This title has been recommended by guest reader Omar El Akkad with whom you will explore the novel and read beyond the book to learn more about the rights of refugees and migrants.

In this guide, you will find El Akkad's reflection on the book, as well as discussion questions, an Amnesty Background section, and an action you can take to help protect vulnerable refugees and people fleeing conflict.

The daughter of an enterprising mother and a wealthy, spoiled father who never had to grow up, *Vi* was the youngest of their four children and the only girl. They gave her a name that meant "precious, tiny one," destined to be cosseted and protected, the family's little treasure.

But the Vietnam War destroys life as they've known it. *Vi*, along with her mother and brothers, manages to escape—but her father stays behind, leaving a painful void as the rest of the family must make a new life for themselves in Canada.

While her family puts down roots, life has different plans for *Vi*. Taken under the wing of Hà, a worldly family friend, and her diplomat lover, *Vi* tests personal boundaries and crosses international ones, letting the winds of life buffet her. From Saigon to Montreal, from Suzhou to Boston to the fall of the Berlin Wall, she is witness to the immensity of geography, the intricate fabric of humanity, the complexity of love, the infinite possibilities before her. Ever the quiet observer, somehow *Vi* must find a way to finally take her place in the world.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. We appreciate your interest and would love to hear from you with any questions, suggestions or comments you may have. Just send us an email at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

We think you will really enjoy *Vi*. Happy reading!

About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit www.amnesty.ca or write to us at:

Amnesty International,
312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.

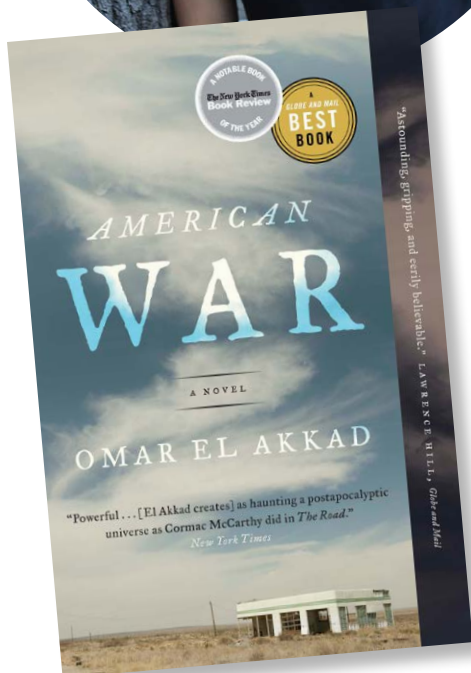
About this month's author, **Kim Thúy**

Born in Saigon in 1968, KIM THÚY left Vietnam with the boat people at the age of ten and settled with her family in Quebec. A graduate in translation and law, she has worked as a seamstress, interpreter, lawyer, restaurant owner, and commentator on radio and television. She lives in Montreal and devotes herself to writing.



About this month's reader, **Omar El Akkad**

Omar El Akkad is an author and journalist. He has reported from Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay and numerous other locations around the world. He is the recipient of a National Newspaper Award for Investigative Journalism and the Goff Penny Award for young journalists. His work has appeared in *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, the *Globe and Mail* and many other newspapers and magazines. His debut novel, *American War*, is an international bestseller and has been translated into thirteen languages. It won the Pacific Northwest Booksellers' Award, the Oregon Book Award for fiction, the Kobo Emerging Writer Prize and has been nominated for more than ten other awards. It was listed as one of the best books of the year by The New York Times, Washington Post, GQ and more than a dozen other publications. He is one of 25 writers featured in the new anthology of speculative fiction, *A People's Future of the United States*. Omar lives in the woods just south of Portland, Oregon.



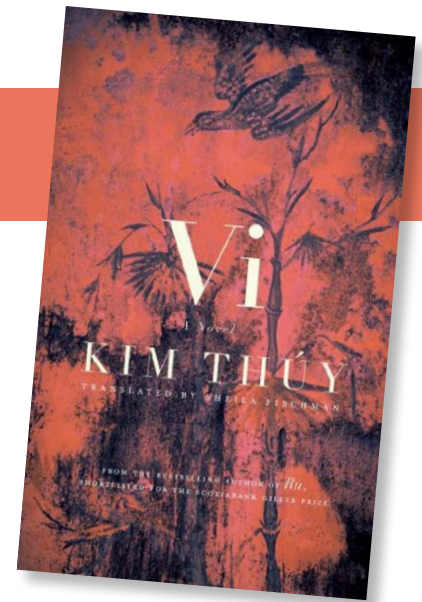
Omar El Akkad's reflections on *Vi*

Vi by Kim Thúy: An ephemeral meditation on the fleeting nature of place.

Every novel is two different beings inhabiting the same skin. A novel is, by definition, its contents –the story, the characters, the words on the page. But a novel is also its negative space – a collection of events, emotions and ephemera left unspoken. And if a novel is very good, it silently plants all these invisible things in a reader's mind like seeds, such that in the aftermath of having read the story, a reader can still feel its offshoots growing.

Vi is that rare breed of novel – a small, quiet story whose negative space is a deafening scream. The book's central story is of escape. The title character, Vi, flees Vietnam alongside most of her immediate family during the American war that decimated that country. She finds herself in Canada, a place of immense remove from her homeland, a place where newness and distance meld into one another, the strange synesthesia of the dispossessed. She grows up, becomes herself – a person at once global in outlook and yet deeply rooted in the secrets and stories of a place she was forced to flee.

Much of the novel is based on Thúy's own experiences, and like all lived experiences, adheres only loosely to a strict narrative arc. The pace is often meditative, sometimes propulsive, but always deliberate. In brief vignettes, the trajectory of Vi's life and the lives she encounters is laid bare in small, beautiful sentences. There is a reverent quality to the way these short chapters are presented and titled, almost always baring not only the name of a place, but an explanation of



what that name means. Like the novel as a whole, each one of these small descriptions traces a line from the past to the present and back to the past, from the roots to the flower to the roots once more.

Thúy works her way from the smallest details outwards, such that in each tiny chapter the thing described is often minor, almost insignificant. And yet from these brief, surgical descriptions, something much larger emerges – something unsaid yet silently presented to the reader. This is *Vi*'s negative space, a place concerned with what it means to belong, to lose, to love.

I have never met Kim Thúy. I know nothing about her beyond a few details gleamed from a couple of newspaper stories I read. Other than the fact that we are both immigrants, I don't know how much we have in common. And yet I felt such closeness to *Vi*. There is something universal about the experience of dislocation, and Thúy manages to capture this sensation perfectly and with enviable economy of language. *Vi* is a beautiful, nuanced novel – a novel in many ways about Canada but not one that centres Canada – and for this reason, I believe, a novel all Canadians would benefit from reading.

—Omar El Akkad



VI: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discussion questions from guest reader

Omar El Akkad

1. What is the significance of the book's looping narrative, which begins in Vietnam, sees its central character move to the other side of the planet, and then returns to Vietnam once more?
2. How does the author explore the myriad forms of violence to which refugees are often subjected? How did the author's occasional descriptions of physical brutality contrast with the novel's overall tone?
3. What was your reaction to the book's treatment of and emphasis on names and the meaning of names (both the names of characters and the names of places)?
4. In what ways does the author invert and subvert traditional power imbalances between genders? In what ways is the agency of the female characters affected by structural factors and circumstances?
5. Did Vi's experiences of her new home in Canada resonate with your own experiences of Canada? Did you recognize your home in hers?

Discussion questions from the

Amnesty International Book Club

1. What did you think of Vi? Which aspects did you appreciate, and which aspects were most challenging?
2. The deep subject of Vi is what Thúy calls "the invisible strength" of women, especially Vietnamese women, whose men, during the war, made a more obvious display of strength as soldiers. Do you agree with the author? What aspects of the story made you see "the invisible strength" of women?
3. Has this book inspired you to think about the refugee narrative? For example in the media versus when you read this story about a family fleeing their home to make a home in Quebec?
4. What risks would you be prepared to take to save your life?

BACKGROUND: REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS



Refugees Welcome Here march, London, 2016

I WELCOME REFUGEES

We share our world, and we share responsibility for making it the kind of place in which we want to live. This includes responsibility for protecting each other's human rights and freedom.

Right now, record numbers of people worldwide have been forced to flee their homes. But instead of protecting refugees, out of fear and prejudice, many of the wealthiest nations are slamming their doors shut and leaving a handful of countries to cope alone. Effective protection for refugees requires international cooperation.

Each country must take responsibility to uphold international obligations and provide asylum and protection to refugees. At an individual level the solution to the global refugee crisis starts with each and every one of us making one simple, personal commitment to help – simply by saying: “I welcome refugees”.

Refugees continue to risk their lives to seek international protection

Refugees and asylum-seekers are forced to contend with dangerous sea and land crossings, increased border closures, pushbacks, and abuses, extortion and violence by law enforcement officials, criminal gangs, smugglers and human traffickers. During transit women and girls are at high risk of sexual and gender-based violence. In transit from the Northern Triangle countries of Central America (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador) towards Mexico and the United States, women and girls are at significant risk of sexual violence – 60% are raped en route – and of sexual exploitation and other forms of violence.



Migrants' clothing caught in razor wire as they tried to cross the frontier to Spain from Morocco at the Spanish enclave of Melilla, October 2005

The global refugee crisis has led to a security-driven response, rather than a human rights-based response.

Globally, states continued to prioritise deterrence policies and measures to block the movement of refugees and asylum-seekers, while putting the onus on states located in the immediate region of displacement or on its peripheries to assume responsibility for protection. An increased prioritization of security concerns over the human rights of refugees also led to a notable increase in obstacles faced by refugees and asylum-seekers to seek and enjoy protection.

The global refugee crisis has led to a security-driven response, rather than a human rights-based response.

Opportunity for change

Wealthy states and the international community as a whole have failed to equitably share responsibility for managing the ongoing global refugee crisis. Currently, such responsibility lies disproportionately with poorer countries: 86 percent of the world's refugees are in developing regions. Many countries have acknowledged that current responses to refugees are not working.

Amnesty is calling for all states to equitably share responsibility to resettle all refugees who meet United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees's vulnerability criteria and provide other safe and legal routes for refugees to find protection.

Amnesty International is also calling on more countries to put in place systems and processes that guarantee access to fair asylum processes and to ensure that there are fewer abuses committed against migrants and refugees in their search for safety.

TAKE ACTION: Defend the rights of refugees



Solidarity event in Spain in support of refugees

PROTECT VULNERABLE REFUGEES AND PEOPLE FLEEING CONFLICT

Every day across the world people make the difficult decision to leave their homes. War, persecution, environmental disaster and poverty are just some of the reasons why a person might have to leave their family, community or country.

[Sign up here to take action with Amnesty International](#)

Click the link above to say: Yes, I stand behind Amnesty International's worldwide effort to:

- protect vulnerable migrants from hunger, rape, attacks and other human rights violations

- mobilize governments to provide relief and protection for refugees
- campaign to stop the armed conflicts that lead to people fleeing their homes
- strengthen laws to protect internally displaced peoples and refugees

Amnesty International's research shows that refugees and internally displaced people face serious human rights violations.

All people, regardless of their status in a country, have human rights, including the right to freedom from slavery and servitude, freedom from arbitrary detention, freedom from exploitation and forced labour, the right to freedom of assembly, the right to education for their children, equal access to courts and rights at work.

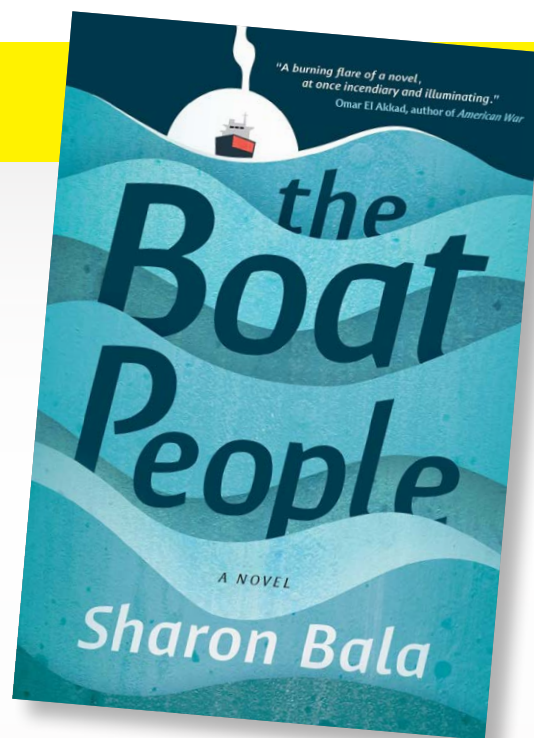
>> Together we will create a world with human rights for all, no matter who they are or where they live!

MORE ABOUT THE ISSUE OF REFUGEES

COMING UP IN
MARCH/APRIL 2019

The Boat People by Sharon Bala

Recommended by guest reader
Randy Kaneen



The *Boat People* is an extraordinary novel about a group of refugees who survive a perilous ocean voyage only to face the threat of deportation amid accusations of terrorism.

When a rusty cargo ship carrying Mahindan and five hundred fellow refugees from Sri Lanka's bloody civil war reaches Vancouver's shores, the young father thinks he and his six-year-old son can finally start a new life. Instead, the group is thrown into a detention processing center, with government officials and news headlines speculating that among the "boat people" are members of a separatist militant organization responsible for countless suicide attacks—and that these terrorists now pose a threat to Canada's national security. As the refugees become subject to heavy interrogation, Mahindan begins to fear



that a desperate act taken in Sri Lanka to fund their escape may now jeopardize his and his son's chance for asylum.

Told through the alternating perspectives of Mahindan; his lawyer,

Priya, a second-generation Sri Lankan Canadian who reluctantly represents the refugees; and Grace, a third-generation Japanese Canadian adjudicator who must decide Mahindan's fate as evidence mounts against him, *The Boat People* is a spellbinding and timely novel that provokes a deeply compassionate lens through which to view the current refugee crisis.

The discussion guide will be sent out March 2019.

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at Bookclub@amnesty.ca

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