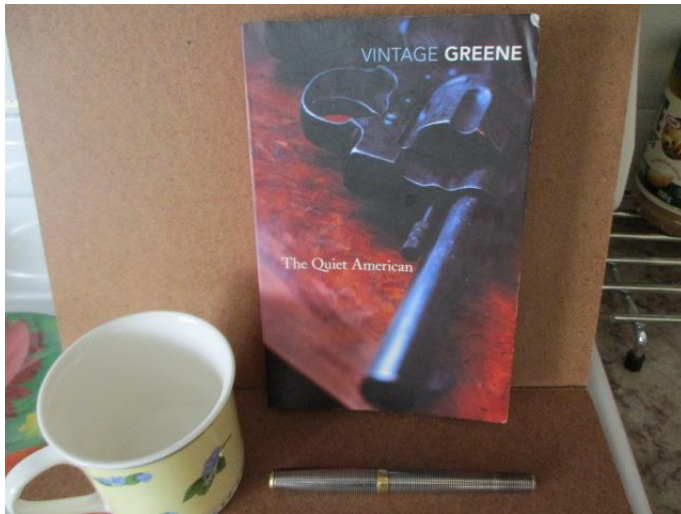


The Quiet American

By Rod Fraser



Like many other novels reviewed in these pages, I first watched *The Quiet American* on a DVD obtained from my local library. The adaptation I watched was filmed in 2002, starring Michael Caine and Brendan Fraser. An earlier film adaptation was done in 1958, starring Audie Murphy and Michael Redgrave.

The book was written by Graham Greene. My copy is only 180 pages — both indications I'd enjoy an evening or two of good reading. All in all, although the film was interesting and worthwhile, I preferred the book.

Many details of the story were clearer in the novel, and since I was interested in the early years of the conflict in Vietnam, I wanted to learn as much as I could of those turbulent years. `



Before I get to *The Quiet American*, it might help if I told you a bit of the early history of that region. The French government was the dominant colonial power in French Indochina (i.e. Vietnam and a few smaller countries on its borders) for many decades. This was interrupted by the Japanese occupation of some (or perhaps all) of Vietnam during the late 1930s and the war years.

When World War II ended, France intended to reassert its colonial authority and sent troops to Vietnam to achieve this end. Unfortunately, they were faced with a determined local resistance.

Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the Viet Minh (a group dedicated to Vietnamese independence), proclaimed the *Democratic Republic of Vietnam* in 1946, and fought a guerilla war to throw the French out of Indochina. He planned to set up a communist government, much like Russia or China. In this, he was mostly successful.

France fought this war for a number of years until its humiliating defeat by the Viet Minh at Dien Bien

Phu in 1954. Thereafter a peace treaty was concluded and the country divided into North and South Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh was to lead the communist state in the north. Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic Nationalist, emerged as the leader of South Vietnam (propped up by the United States).

This peace agreement led to the departure of the French Army from Vietnam and the replacement of its forces (over time) with the United States Army.

A state of war existed between North and South Vietnam for many years until 1975 when the United States left Vietnam for good. Ho Chi Minh and his North Vietnamese Army unified North and South Vietnam under communist rule. This country — now known as Vietnam — continues to this day.



The Quiet American is a novel about Vietnam in the early years of the 1950s, when the French army was fighting desperately to hold onto the country. Ho Chi Minh (and the Viet Minh) resisted this — by engaging in an effective guerilla war with the French. The novel is only peripherally involved with the fighting. It is really a story of three people who are living in Saigon at the time.

The narrator of the book is a jaded, middle-aged English journalist by the name of Thomas Fowler

(Michael Caine in the film). He has been working in Vietnam for two years, reporting the war news.

During his sojourn in Vietnam, he has taken up with a young, beautiful Vietnamese woman by the name of Phuong. They live together in Saigon where Fowler monitors the war news (with occasional trips to the war zone in the north). He sends regular reports to his newspaper each week.

Unfortunately for Phuong, there isn't much of a future with Fowler. He is still married to a Catholic woman in Britain, who won't give him a divorce. It is only a matter of time before Fowler is recalled home, and it is unlikely Phuong will be able to join him when he does.



During an evening out at the Continental, a hotel and dining establishment in Saigon, Fowler and Phuong meet Aldon Pyle, a 32 year old American, employed with the U.S. Economic Aid Mission. This is a merely a cover; he is really a CIA agent — a spy who hopes to use America's influence to keep Vietnam free from Communist rule.

Pyle is a devotee of the theories of York Harding, a writer who argues that the future of foreign lands might not be best served by either colonialism or communism, but rather by a combination of the older traditions. To the more cynical Fowler,

Harding's theories are merely a ruse — a means of keeping Vietnam and other third world countries under Western influence and free from Communist control.

When Pyle turns to Fowler for advice on the country, the older man's cynical realism does not shake Pyle's resolve. He is convinced the military power of the United States might be effectively used to impose Harding's vision on the country.

During the evening, Pyle dances with Phuong and within weeks, falls in love with her. He travels to meet Fowler in the war zone in the north of the country to tell him of this love, and how he intends to win Phuong over and marry her.



This sets up the plot of the novel. Pyle and Fowler are now in competition for the affections of Phuong.

It is clear Pyle has more to offer. He is unmarried and willing to bring Phuong to America as his wife when his tour of duty finishes. Fowler tries to compete with Pyle, by writing his wife and asking her for a divorce.

Soon Pyle wins Phuong's affections and she moves in with him. Interestingly, this competition is carried out with great civility. Pyle likes Fowler and wants to win Phuong fairly. He hopes to be friends

with Fowler, while doing what he can to win and keep Phuong for himself.

To Fowler, it seems Pyle has the same childish approach to love as he does to foreign policy. He is naïve and unprepared for the power of determined people to thwart his hopes.

So against the backdrop of a country torn apart by war and intrigue, the battle for Phuong continues. It seems Fowler has a few tricks of his own to ensure he retains the love and loyalty of this lovely young woman.

This is a wonderful story, highly recommended for readers interested in the Far East and its history. I'll leave you to read the book and find out its cynical conclusion.

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