

# The Alleys of Eden Short Guide

## The Alleys of Eden by Robert Olen Butler

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# Characters

Clifford Wilkes, as a deserter in Saigon, came to feel himself very much a part of Vietnamese culture, and lived for years with Lanh, a bar girl, speaking Vietnamese with her almost exclusively. At the last hour of helicopter evacuation flights from the U. S. embassy, Cliff decides they must leave, as neither of them would be welcomed by the coming communist regime. Lanh is ethnically Vietnamese, but as an orphan who fell into the life of bar girl and prostitute, surviving by consorting with American soldiers, she would likely be captured, publicly shamed, then put to hard labor — if not executed. Cliff, as an American soldier who deserted but did little to support "the other side," beyond producing a few articles which a working journalist sent on to a leftist publication in San Francisco, expects no better treatment than Lanh.

When the two get to the U.S. fleet off the coast of South Vietnam, they separate to protect themselves, as Cliff must hide his true identity as a deserter. To remain "free" in the land of the free, he can never divulge his real name and social security number, lest he be traced and arrested on charges of desertion. Cliff lives with conflicting forces of bonding and alienation. While assigned to a military intelligence unit in Vietnam, he was party to an interrogation session in which the prisoner died. His immediate commander sought information about the capture of another man in their unit. Despite the loyalties a soldier may sense for a fellow soldier, and for the nation his uniform represents, Cliff responds to the broader loyalty to humanity. He cannot remain in service after witnessing the death of the prisoner. Since his parents are dead, and his wife has divorced him, Cliff's family ties to the U.S.A. are tenuous.

The two lovers meet again in Illinois after Lanh has been officially resettled with the help of a small-town church, and Cliff has secured a counterfeit New York driver's license with a new cover identity. Lanh is desperately isolated because of her very limited English skills, and she draws close to the few other Vietnamese in the town, while Cliff — in his homeland — can speak the language fluently, but must constantly avoid activities that would reveal his presence to the economic and legal systems. While the lovers are reunited for a time, neither can accept self or the other as belonging where they are. They separate — each resenting the degree to which the other seems able to relate to a home community — even though the connections to others of "their own kind" are actually quite limited.

## Social Concerns

The characters in *The Alleys of Eden* struggle with issues of personal identity and sociocultural identity. Each struggles to define the self, grappling with the complexities of language, culture and political ideology. Neither main character wishes to engage in the struggle. Simply keeping a sense of self while relating to the beloved other requires more effort and understanding than either can consistently muster.

Past actions shape the present and future.

What are the costs to an individual of belonging to another person in a love relationship? What are the costs to an individual of belonging to a social group? When is a homeland not a homeland? For Butler's protagonists in this novel, external forces pressure the individuals to choose sides when they never really wanted to do so. Languages, customs, laws and combat all force Cliff and Lanh to choices they would rather avoid.

## Techniques

In an era much influenced by film and video media, Butler composes with much attention to visual effects. *The Alleys of Eden* is divided into two books — the first based in Vietnam, and the second based in the United States.

Within the chapters of each book, however, Cliff frequently falls into reverie, with memories of his courtship, marriage and divorce, college education, social and political activism, military training and Vietnam duty assignments fading in and out of his perceptions of his immediate present. Such time shifts and fades may occur within a single paragraph or even within a single sentence.

# Themes

The novel explores multiple human connections: between lovers from different lands; between Americans via language, law and culture; between Vietnamese immigrants in a small Illinois town via language and culture.

For both groups, Butler illustrates connections between people and land.

Quentin and June Forbes, the American couple that wishes to befriend Cliff and Lanh, are well versed in archaeology and Native American civilizations.

They own several ancient Indian artifacts which they have found at sites they have explored. In attempting to involve Lanh in conversation at the Forbes's home, Cliff prompts her to explain that, for centuries, Vietnamese farmers have been buried in the fields they have tilled all their lives. So, in both countries, aspects of the terrain link the present with the past.

The love relationship is closely tied to sexual passion. In bursts of insecurity, Lanh derides herself as having undesirable physical attributes when compared to big-busted American blondes, and accuses Cliff of resenting her past as a prostitute. Cliff denies that his uncertainties grow from jealousy about her past, contending that she refuses to deal effectively with the need to adapt to the present and the future — she is afraid of the States, and reluctant to try to learn more of the language. Given contacts with Binh, another Vietnamese refugee, and his family, Lanh finds far more stress in staying with Cliff than with Binh's family. Hence the novel works variations on the theme of alienation.



# Key Questions

The official policy of the United States government for its military and foreign service personnel is that they are to represent the interests of the USA to other governments. When anyone identifies too closely with the culture and behaviors of another country, that person is often construed to have "gone native," and may be transferred out of sensitive assignments, or even may be rotated out of the country concerned, judged unreliable for official duties in the context of interest.

Personnel in sensitive positions who marry foreign nationals often lose their security clearance.

The Alleys of Eden presents ordinary human beings in dire straits. It gives opportunity for discussing how individuals respond to civilian clashes of culture and to the pressures of military service which can include causing the suffering and death of other human beings.

1. What circumstances brought Lanh to the life of a Saigon bar girl? What options for making money does the job afford? What options does she put to use? When and why does she use them? How does her lifestyle shape her self-image?
2. What events brought Clifford Wilkes to live with Lanh? How long has he stayed with her before they leave Saigon? How has he been able to survive financially? What work has he been able to do? Why does he enjoy life in the back streets so much?
3. Why do Cliff and Lanh decide they will not be safe in Saigon?
4. What are the hazards Cliff and Lanh encounter as they make their way to the embassy? What responses to the fall of Saigon do they see in South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians en route? How does Cliff get the two of them into the American embassy compound and onto an evacuation helicopter?
5. What does Cliff do to conceal his identity during the evacuation by helicopter? What measures does he take once they are on board ship with other evacuees? How does he avoid detection by the military after landing at the air base for processing?
6. How does Lanh notify Cliff of her location in the United States after she is resettled? What agency has direct supervision of her first placement in the USA? What is her first job? How well does she communicate with her benefactors?
7. Since Cliff is highly fluent in Vietnamese, why is he unable to involve Lanh more in the dinner conversation at the Forbes's home by translating more of the exchanges into Vietnamese for her? How does June Forbes communicate with Lanh? How does Lanh feel about June Forbes and her "conversation"?
8. When Cliff and Lanh dine with Binh's family, how well does Cliff relate to the group? Does Cliff have a problem with understanding vocabulary or accent in the conversation?



How well does Cliff understand his own emotional response to being "different" from the others?

9. When Binh and Cliff converse alone by the river, what does Binh reveal about his self-image in both the past and the present? What future does Binh foresee for himself and his family in Speedway, Illinois? What signs of adjusting to the new life situation are evident in Binh and his family?

10. When Cliff accepts the job from Quentin Forbes, what problems does he face? Why does he contact his ex-mother-in-law and his ex-wife? What are the results of the contacts?

11. For several years, Cliff and Lanh's feelings for each other have been very strong. In Speedway, they are apparently accepted as an interracial couple. Why, in the end, do they go their separate ways instead of getting married and settling down in traditional fashion?

12. Many books and articles have been written to clarify "the lessons of Vietnam." To what extent does Butler's story have political implications? Are these political implications spoken directly by any of the characters in the novel?

13. Butler gives the reader a very sympathetic view of Cliff and of Lanh, ordinary human beings struggling to survive in societies clashing in war.

Traditional expectations in society would hold both main characters in disgrace: He is a deserter, and she is a prostitute. Why does Cliff not turn himself in to the authorities in the USA, take his punishment, then resume life as he wishes to live it? Why does Lanh not concentrate on learning English and getting some occupational training?

14. To what extent do Cliff and Lanh accept responsibility for their actions in Saigon before they leave? To what extent do they accept responsibility for themselves in the USA?

15. Cliff is a person who has embraced Vietnamese language and culture avidly. In what ways does the novel give an average American reader insights into the thoughts, traditions and/or folkways of Vietnamese emigres in the USA?



# Literary Precedents

While Butler claims specific literary influence from the Old Testament prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Daniel, and the New Testament writer Luke, he has read a considerable range of English and American literature. The focus on human perceptions and human responses to war in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), and other such novels stand as worthy general precedents to the sensitive dealing with human fears and desires in *The Alleys of Eden*.



## Related Titles

Wilson Hand, the other enlisted man who traveled with Cliff and Captain Fleming on their regular circuit of intelligence contacts, a minor character in *The Alleys of Eden*, is the main character in *Sun Dogs*. Divorced, a private investigator going broke, Hand accepts a job with a major oil company to investigate the theft of company documents from sites in Alaska.

Frequently distracted by flashbacks to his week as a prisoner of the Viet Cong during his military service, Hand is also troubled by his ex-wife's mental illness and suicide. Pursuing truth in the extremes of Alaskan winter, he encounters "no-strings-attached sex" with Marta Walsh whom he discovers eventually to be more free than he cared to know. As shuttling between New York and northern Alaska brings him to a full grasp of his assignment, Hand and his bush pilot companion are forced down in a mountain pass in foul weather. Hand determines the bleak prospects require great personal sacrifice for his friend.

With *On Distant Ground* (1985), Butler takes up the tale of Captain David Fleming, the officer in charge of Clifford Wilkes and Wilson Hand when the three served with a military intelligence unit in Vietnam. Fleming is brought up on charges of freeing a Viet Cong officer in his custody, and has had perspective-changing close encounters with other aspects of Vietnam, including a brief affair with a very sophisticated woman.

# Copyright Information

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