Catfish and Mandala: A Two-wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam Study Guide

Catfish and Mandala: A Two-wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam by Andrew X. Pham

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Catfish and Mandala, by Andrew X. Pham, comingled a narrative of the author's solo bicycle tour of Vietnam with his memories of his birth and boyhood there, which ended when he immigrated to America with his family near the end of the Vietnam War. Its subtitle was appropriate: A Two-Wheeled Voyage through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam. The book began with the author's encounter in Mexico with an American veteran of the Vietnam War who was separated from his wife and child and seemed emotionally lost. This set the stage for Andrew's many observations and ruminations concerning the relationship between America, his adoptive land, and Vietnam, his native land. Several American Vietnam veterans appeared in the story, as did many Vietnamese who participated in the war or were affected by it. Each such scene symbolized Andrew's own conflicted feelings about being caught between two cultures and feeling as though he did not fully belong to either one. Moreover, this entrapment between the two worlds made Andrew angry, bitter, confused, and sometimes sad, nostalgic, or wistful. All these feelings were experienced and explored by him during his journey through Vietnam as a young man to visit the people and places of his boyhood. The changes he encountered in both the villages and in extended family members were emblematic of the changes through which he had personally gone during his transformation from a Vietnamese boy to a Vietnamese-American man.

Through reminiscences and conversations, the dramatic stories of Andrew's family members before, during, and after the Vietnam War were delivered as counterpoints to his experiences with those people and others during his bicycle trip. One of the saddest aspects of the family life stories was that everything the Phams suffered—grinding poverty, imprisonment, terror, escape, uncertainty, and desperate longing—was not rewarded with happiness. Most of the family members achieved financial security and personal safety, but all seemed scarred by what they had endured. Even Andrew, who benefited from a good American education, felt that many other Americans either tolerated or actively loathed him because of his Asian blood, while the Vietnamese mostly thought of him as a rich escapee from his own country, a snobbish traitor to his origins. Much of the book was about this sense of displacement that Andrew felt. His bicycle trips, first in Mexico, and then up the coast of the United States, and finally through Vietnam, were outward reflections of an inward journey, which the author obviously hoped would help him to find some measure of peace.

Throughout the book, stories of Andrew's past and of his family kept breaking into the contemporary stories from his bicycle trip, showing not only that the journey was dredging up many memories, but also that Andrew was obsessed with his intense past, and with trying to work out what it meant to his present and future. What emerged from all this was the portrait of a sensitive young man burdened with bitterness and longing, a combination that made the reader hope that the author would someday be able to forge a more peaceful path through his life.

Prologue and Chapters 1-3

Prologue and Chapters 1-3 Summary and Analysis

In his book, Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam, Andrew X. Pham recounted his adventures bicycling through Vietnam to visit people and places he knew before his family immigrated to America. His encounters on the road were poignant and sometimes harrowing, and he added another dimension to the story by describing the lives and difficult relationships over the years within his large, pain-filled family.

The book began with a short quote from the poet, Max Garland, about sadness and longing. It was followed by a one-paragraph Prologue that said a Vietnamese Buddhist monk had foretold that Andrew's sister, Chi, would commit suicide at age 32, which came true. When Andrew's Grandmother asked if he would like to read his fortune, written 27 years earlier by the same monk, he declined, quit his job and rode his bicycle into Mexico.

Chapter 1, "Exile-Pilgrim," opened with a description of a huge white man named Tyle whom Andrew met in the Mexican desert. Andrew had been riding his bike through Mexico for a month. When Tyle asked where he was from, Andrew said California, but Tyle wanted to know his original country, and Andrew said Vietnam. He later reflected on a comment someone once made about his sister, Chi, that her death was caused by becoming too American. This thought foreshadowed a concern Andrew would have throughout the book, about where he fit into the two societies, Vietnamese and American. Tyle showed up later that night at Andrew's campfire, and they drank tequila. Tyle said he had been in Mexico, away from his wife and two boys, for nine years. Confessing that he was a soldier in Vietnam, he apologized to Andrew, and began to cry. He asked forgiveness, and Andrew gave him the Vietnamese's most honored gift, which was his silence.

Chapter 2, "Catfish-Dawn," began with Andrew's description of himself as an average-looking Vietnamese-American man who arrived in America with his family in 1977, when he was 10. In his fifth-grade class, he got into a heated argument with the teacher about America's retreat from Vietnam, which adults had told Andrew was cowardly. The author used this encounter as an entrée to a background story about how his family fled Saigon after its fall in 1975, but were caught by the Viet Cong and put in a prison and labor camp. The women and children were released a month later to go home, but the men, including Andrew's father, were retained. Many were executed. Andrew's father, Thong, later told his son about friends and acquaintances at the camp who were executed each day, when their names were called over a loudspeaker after nightfall. Unbeknownst to the Viet Cong, Thong had led 2,000 men in an army unit that dealt in psychological warfare. He and other prisoners were forced to clear land mines for the Viet Cong, often losing arms and legs in the process. One night, Thong's name was

called over the loudspeaker. He was put on a truck, taken to an unmarked crossroads, and left there.

Chapter 3 was the first of several short chapters of family history throughout the book, each of which was titled, "Fallen-Leaves" and was written in italics and past tense, compared to the story of the bicycling adventures, which were in present tense. The author recalled the winter of 1961 in the Vietnamese fishing village of Phan Thiet, where his then-young parents, Thong and Anh, lived in a one-room shack. They had eloped, had a baby girl, and were extremely poor, but happy. When the child became sick and feverish, they had no money for a doctor or medicine. Not yet a year old, the baby died during the night.

Chapters 4-7

Chapters 4-7 Summary and Analysis

At the start of Chapter 4, "Clan-Rift," the author had been back in California's Bay Area from Mexico for four months, without a job or a place to live. He had moved in with his parents, which made sense to his Vietnamese-American friends but evoked pity from his other friends. Andrew told nobody about his plan to cycle through Vietnam, saying that his next ride would just be up the coast toward Seattle and maybe into Canada. His family thought he was recuperating from a breakup with a girl named Trieu, who cheated on him and left him, information that foreshadowed the later story of the romance of Andrew and Trieu. Andrew's mother kept saying he should wait for a good day on the Chinese calendar to begin his trip, which was symbolic of the cultural gulf between Andrew's Vietnamese upbringing and his young manhood in America. The author further emphasized this gulf in describing his father as a subservient, eager-to-please Vietnamese-American that Andrew could never be. Awkwardly, he said goodbye to his family, who never learned how to hug each other, and began his ride up the coast, euphoric until he quickly became exhausted going up the cliffs of Highway 1.

Chapter 5, "Fallen-Leaves," continued where Chapter 3 left off, as the author's mother and father continued to struggle for a living after the death of their baby daughter. They saved some money and had hopes of buying a tavern. Anh became pregnant again, and Thong was drafted into the Vietnamese army, where he hoped his education would help him to obtain a good posting.

Chapter 6, "Headwind-Tailspin," began with Andrew thinking about one of his brothers, Tien, asking if he would ever commit suicide as their sister did. Andrew replied that he might, but first he would visit some unknown place. On the road, he soon began to appreciate bicycle touring. He rode north, through California's wine country, and then up the coast to Corvallis, Oregon, where he stayed overnight with a young woman named Ronnie, who was a friend of a woman he met in Mexico named Patty. It turned out that Ronnie had been in a mental institution for three years, and was still half-crazy. The next day, he was harassed on the road by drivers who did not like Orientals, and he thought about his brother, Huy, whose gay lover in San Francisco told Andrew to travel with a pistol and pepper spray. Friends of Patty had gathered at her house in Portland and, that night, they had a wonderful party that the author contrasted to the dysfunction he previously had encountered. In Seattle, he tried to work his way across the ocean on a freighter but could not find a job and ended up buying an air ticket to Vietnam with a 45-day layover in Japan.

In Chapter 7, "Japan-Dream," the author commented on the love-hate relationship Vietnamese had toward the successful Japanese, who brutally occupied their country in World War II. Unable to find his way out of the airport, Andrew followed an old man on a bicycle, who thought he was being chased and eluded Andrew, and ended up camping near an emergency runway. The next day, he stayed at a hostel in Tokyo, and then

pedaled to Mount Fuji, to Kyoto, and to the beach near Shimizu, where his campsite almost got flooded in a storm. Unable to find shelter, he finally spent a miserable, wet night against a stone wall near the airport.

Chapters 8-11

Chapters 8-11 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 8, "Last-Gamble," the author added another layer to his movement back and forth in time, by reminiscing about a trip when he was nine to the town of his birth in Vietnam, Phan Thiet, "the fish sauce capital." Andrew's step-father, Grandpa Le, made a fortune in fish sauce before he died. The author recounted a family gathering at Grandma Le's house that included Andrew's Auntie Dung and his siblings, Chi, Huy, Tien, and Hien. They feasted during the entire visit. Grandma Le ran a small store that Andrew tended, where he met a poor neighbor girl whom he regularly fed. Grandma Le also had been kind to Chi, whom she had helped to raise. Andrew recalled a leper-boy who had given Chi crackers, which their father had forbidden. When he found out, he beat Chi so severely that she fled to Grandma Le's house, and never came back. At this reunion when Andrew was nine, Chi kept her distance from their father. Chi liked living with her grandmother and was not excited about the family's plan to escape from Vietnam and immigrate to America. Early one morning, they set out on foot, planning to meet their father and a fishing boat for escape.

Chapter 9, "Mecca-Memory," returned to the present, as Andrew flew into Ho Chi Minh City, known as Saigon before and during the Vietnam War. He felt apprehensive because of his war years there as a child. Other travelers at the airport expected all Vietnamese-Americans to be rich, but Andrew had little money and had brought no gifts for his relatives. After an ordeal at Customs and in baggage claim that he found rude and stressful, he was met by his Grandaunt Nguyen and her three sons, Viet, Khuong, and Hung. The contrast between Andrew as an Americanized Vietnamese and his relatives had begun to be made apparent by the author. While he went with his relatives to their house, the author's memories brought the reader to the fires, looting, whizzing bullets, and madness during the fall of Saigon, as his family scrambled to escape Vietnam.

In Chapter 10, "Strange-Hearth," Andrew was introduced to his Granduncle Nguyen, and was given a cot next to the bed in Hung's room. The next morning, Andrew went out for breakfast with Hung, Viet, and Khuong, and then had his bike put into top running condition for $1. He went on a hair-raising motorcycle ride with Viet through the city's disorderly traffic, which provided further evidence of the author's disconnection from his roots. Viet tried to convince Andrew that riding his bicycle alone to Hanoi was very dangerous, but Andrew insisted that he would do it. This not only showed the resolve in the author's character, but was symbolic of an American-like optimism that everything would be all right, in contrast to the pessimism of the Vietnamese, whose country had suffered major travails.

Chapter 11, "Fallen-Leaves," continued the flashback of previous chapters with the same title. Andrew, known as "An," was four, and Chi was nine. They watched as a green army truck arrived and jubilant white soldiers jumped out, giving them candy and

teaching them games. It became evident that through these "Fallen-Leaves" chapters, the author was creating an intermittent "back story" of his life that would help to explain why this trip had become so important to him.

Three storylines emerged: the current bicycling adventure, a recounting of the early years of the marriage of Andrew's parents, and his reminiscences about his family's escape from Vietnam.

Chapters 12-15

Chapters 12-15 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 12, "Divergent-Rhythm," began with a description of one of Andrew's great-aunt's sons, Hung, who was a filmmaker whose wife took their daughter to America four years earlier. Hung was having trouble getting permission to immigrate and was worried that he would not be able to work as a filmmaker in America. Whereas Hung was rather unstable, Kuong was the good, hard-working son, unafraid of the outside world, and Andrew's only supporter of his bike trip to Hanoi. The eldest brother, Viet, was very likeable and held a master's degree in chemistry, but his soft drink bottling business was in the process of going bankrupt, destroyed by Pepsi and Coca-Cola. These mini-portraits showed how the world at large, and particularly America, held sway over the lives of the Vietnamese. All four young men went drinking at a bar where the bartender killed cobras at the table and put their still-beating hearts into shot glasses of rice wine. Telling Andrew that he said he wanted to be Vietnamese, they forced him to drink, and he retched on the floor, to their amusement. During his stay with the Nguyens, Andrew spent most of his time in the company of these young men, particularly Hung, who introduced him to what the author described as all sorts of depravity.

In Chapter 13, "Dying-Angels," the author returned to the story of his family's escape from Vietnam. Hiding on a beach where a fishing boat was supposed to meet them, they were joined by Andrew's Auntie Dung and his father. The boat did not arrive, and everyone became nervous except Andrew's mother, who remained convinced that it would appear because the signs of the Chinese calendar had been good. It did arrive, but after they got on board, the crew threw a net overboard to pretend to be fishing, and the net got caught in the propeller. A Vietnamese patrol boat approached, but the family hid, and the soldiers thought the boat was fishing. Later, they cut the net free. The next day on the open ocean, they spotted a freighter and raised a makeshift Japanese flag, even as the ship bore down on them.

In Chapter 14, "Alley-World," the author shifted back to the present-tense account of his return to Saigon on his cycling trip. He took a cup of tea up a ladder to the roof of the Nguyen's house, which caused his mind to go back to the tiny room of his childhood that overlooked the lane behind his house. He described the view of shops and homes, and how his parents would lock him in the house for days when they left town on business. He would talk to the girl across the alley, who also was locked in her house. The isolation of An's childhood was further intensified, because his parents had saved up to send him to a private French school for boys, where he was the only student without money. The scene shifted back to the present, and Andrew biked out to the Saigon house where his family lived, but found that it had been turned into a community health clinic. He looked around the place, but too much had changed. His mind returned to the day before the fall of Saigon, when he met an old woman in the chaos of the streets who, upon hearing that Andrew's family was going to America, asked the little boy to be her benefactor.

Chapter 15, "Beggar-Grace," went back to contemporary Saigon. The author described the bars, the red light district, and a busy intersection called Turtle Fountain, where he met a little beggar girl who looked like his former lover, Trieu. He gave her money, much to Viet's disgust. The encounter disturbed Andrew, who raced his bicycle endlessly in the traffic around Turtle Fountain. Back at the Nguyen's house, he embarrassed his relatives by crying, for the poverty, for his dead sister, and for all the sadnesses of the world. He went to a bar alone, drank, and decided to head toward Hanoi in the morning.

Chapters 16-19

Chapters 16-19 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 16, a "Fallen-Leaves" chapter, the author recalled his mother, Anh, having tea before the fall of Saigon with an old friend who was going to Paris and wanted Anh's family to come, too. Meanwhile, An was being jostled by a crowd that knocked his ice cream cone out of his hands. He sensed fire, and realized that the crowd was watching a Buddhist monk sacrificing himself to the flames.

Chapter 17, "Hope-Adrift," returned to the storyline of the family's escape from Vietnam. Everyone in the fishing boat was fearful as the big ship bore down on them, but then it veered away. Over the next day, the crew devoured all the supplies, which were supposed to last a week. Finally, a French ship appeared, but it passed close by as the captain and crew watched impassively from the deck. By the third day, the escapees were desperate. The crew wanted to turn toward Thailand, but Anh subdued them with the command that they would continue to Malaysia or they would not be paid. The sea was rough, and the boat began to break apart. Finally, an Indonesian freighter arrived and everyone was pulled aboard just as the fishing boat began to sink. Andrew slipped on the rope ladder and almost fell into the choppy sea, but was grabbed by a crewman. The captain said the fishing boat had been pushed by the weather a hundred miles off course, almost out of the shipping lane.

In Chapter 18, "Gift-Marriage," the author returned to the story of his current adventure. He awoke feeling woozy from the previous night's drinking, bought breakfast from vendors, and prepared for his ride toward Hanoi. At dawn, the entire Nguyen family sent him off. His first stop would be the village of Vung Tau, where the mother of Sean, the partner of Andrew's brother, Huy, had a beach house. Viet, Khuong, and a nephew all accompanied Andrew on one motorcycle. Five hours later, they arrived and the other three said goodbye. Andrew spent the night at the beach house with the housekeeper and his wife. The next day, he was approached by Vietnamese men who at first seemed threatening but became friendly when they realized he was not Japanese. Andrew made friends with one of them, Tam, who introduced him to taxi dancers, or hospitality girls. He spent days with one of the girls, Kim, who asked him to take her to America. He said he could not do that, although he was not sure why.

Chapter 19, "Jade-Giant," described the refugee compound in Indonesia where Andrew's family lived for 18 months after their escape from Vietnam. They shared a room with a couple from Hong Kong who eventually tried to make Chi and Auntie Dung become prostitutes. Chi's brothers punished the couple through a series of pranks, such as putting bugs in their bed. Andrew made friends with a Chinese jade cutter named Wong who had been in the camp for 12 years. One day, Wong tore up his room, climbed on the roof, and jumped off to his death. Andrew never knew exactly why.

Chapters 20-23

Chapters 20-23 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 20, "Fullcircle-Halflives," the author returned to his current trip, expressing a desire to get away from Vung Tao and Kim. His next destination was Minh Luong Prison, where his father had been held. He took several public vehicles to the village of Rach Gia. On the way, two toughs boarded the bus and bullied everyone into buying a cure-all potion. Andrew refused to pay, but just when the situation got dangerous, the woman who owned the bus paid for him, and the toughs disembarked. They stopped for a long lunch, to the dismay of the passengers, and then endured a search by police looking for contraband, who took away cartons of cigarettes as a bribe. Andrew spent the night in Rach Gia, and then hired a motorcyclist to take him to the prison. When they got there, it was a village, and none of the old compound's structures had survived. His driver advised him to forget the place.

Chapter 21, "Baptizing-Buddha," did not immediately continue the story of Andrew's family after the refugee camp. Instead, the author reminisced about his Grandpa Pham in Saigon, who was an opium smoker. He described the ritual, and the way everyone in the house tiptoed when Grandpa Pham was slumbering in a stupor. The author then started a new section that described the family's life in Shreveport, Louisiana, which was dominated by the Baptist church that had sponsored them. Andrew's father worked as a janitor. His mother had a baby, Kay, and then stayed at home, because she did not speak English. For Thanksgiving, she cooked their first turkey, which was a disaster, but everyone had to eat it. One Sunday, everyone in the family was baptized, which they accepted largely as a sign of becoming American. Not long afterward, Andrew's father whipped him with a belt for watching television too long, and Andrew stood up to him. He was never whipped again, but Andrew had violence in him. The author confessed that a few years later, he caned his 10 year-old brother, Hien, who came back at him with a knife.

Chapter 22, "Foreign-Asians," returned to Andrew's trip, as he continued toward Hanoi. He went toward the place of his birth, Phan Tiet, staying overnight at the village of Ham Tan. In a humble diner, men asked if he was Korean, Chinese, or Japanese, and did not believe he was Vietnamese. One of the men, quite drunk, became mean, and Andrew responded by saying he was actually Korean. The waitress told the men to leave Andrew alone while he was eating, which was a Vietnamese custom, and Andrew slipped out while they were watching television. He told the innkeeper what had happened and locked himself in his room while the innkeeper and his men went to confront the troublemakers.

Chapter 23, "Milk-Mother," continued with Andrew's cycling trip rather than switching back to his family's story. He sneaked out of Ham Tan before dawn and rode Phan Tiet, where his childhood home had become a motorcycle repair shop. A young man showed him around, and Andrew saw the same divan on which he used to sleep. He and the

young man recognized, in a glance, how easily their roles could have been reversed. Andrew went looking for his grandmother's house but could not find it. A woman who used to know him, but whom he did not remember, took him to his house, where he saw that the star fruit tree in the backyard was now barren. He left, repulsed by the poverty of his roots, and ashamed at his repulsion. The next day, he visited a woman who knew the family, and he told her that Chi had died by an accident rather than by suicide. He then got sick and was bedridden for four days. When he was better, he rode toward Mui Ne, where his family had made their escape from Vietnam.

Chapters 24-27

Chapters 24-27 Summary and Analysis

In returning to the family's story, Chapter 24, "Chi-Daughter," began with a quote from the Buddhist monk's prediction on the day of Chi's birth that she would die at 32 with a broken heart. The author noted that Chi always wanted to be a boy, but Andrew was the first son. Nine months after the family came to America, they moved from Louisiana to California, to be with other Vietnamese immigrants. They lived in depressed circumstances in San Jose, but Andrew's parents worked hard and had plans to get into middle-class America. Twice a month, they went to the beach at Carmel. Chi hated these trips, was silent, and left the family for most of each day at the beach. A teenager, she bandaged her chest to conceal her breasts. Her father, who beat the children less frequently because he had heard that Americans did not like it, nevertheless caned Chi over the bandaging. The next day, police came to the house and arrested their father as a child-beater. Chi, whose bruises had been noticed by a high school teacher, was in a detention center.

In Chapter 25, "Jungle-Station," Andrew had left Mui Ne and was trying to catch a commuter train to a station called Muong Man, from which he could cycle about 1000 miles to Hanoi. He had only $45 but the station master wanted a bribe of $140 and would not let him board without paying it. He missed the train. A conductor took Andrew to lunch and told him that he would not be allowed to take the commuter train no matter what he paid, because he did not look native enough. Andrew stayed up all night and at 7 a.m., the conductor got him on a cargo train. He met some rough men in the boxcar, but they fed him on the three-day trip to Hanoi. As he rode away from the train on his bicycle, a half-dozen policemen stopped him.

Chapter 26, "Night-Wind," went back to the family story, as Chi escaped from the juvenile detention center. She showed up at the family home late at night, worried that going back to the center would mean their father would be convicted of child abuse and jailed. Her brothers gave her all the money they had, two dollars and change, and she left for San Francisco. Their father was released from custody, everything went back to usual, and as the months and years passed with no word from Chi, the family gradually "forgot" her, and Chi became a shameful reminder of failure.

Chapter 27, "Fallen-Leaves," depicted An at five and Chi at 10, sitting on the divan-bed in their Singapore house. Their parents were away, it was raining, and the two children went outside. They urinated into the river while old folks watched from doorways, envying the happiness of the young.

Chapters 28-31

Chapters 28-31 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 28, "Hanoi-Visage," the author described what happened after the policemen stopped him at the train station. One of the men who were in the boxcar with him intervened, explaining to the sergeant that Andrew was his cousin. Andrew had photocopied his travel documents and left the originals with the Nguyens, fearing that they would be lost or stolen during the trip, but to move around the country without them was illegal. A crowd gathered around the policemen, and Andrew handed his photocopied documents to the sergeant. An older policeman then approached, questioned Andrew, and welcomed him to Hanoi, dispelling the problem. Andrew got a room but was awakened in the night by a policeman who said he could not stay at this hotel, because it was for Vietnamese citizens only. The policeman wanted a bribe but Andrew did not offer it, and the cop said he would be back shortly to move Andrew to an expensive hotel. Andrew left right away, and found another place. In the morning, he went to the tourist district, and enjoyed himself for several days with young people from other countries. Chapter 29, "Patriot-Repose," continued with Andrew's trip. He went to a mausoleum to view the mummified remains of Ho Chi Minh, who founded the Vietnamese Communist Party and was president of Vietnam from 1946 to his death in 1969. The author gave a brief biography of "Uncle Ho," including a speculation that he was gay. Later, he bantered with young girls selling rice cakes and befriended a charismatic 10 year-old deaf boy, whom Andrew knew he later would miss.

Chapter 30, "Silence-Years," went back to 1985, when Andrew was a junior in high school in San Jose. His Vietnamese-American friends, led by Cu-Den and Manh, had regular fights with two other gangs, one of white boys and the other of Mexican-Americans. Andrew had continued to cane his younger brothers until 1984, when little Hien came back at him with a knife, and Andrew realized how wrong he was. Andrew had read the Bible for years after Chi left, but gradually he stopped praying or hoping for miracles. At this point, the story switched to 1975, just before Saigon fell. Andrew met a young woman who was searching the sky for angels. He could see that she was desperate, so he told her he saw the angels. The story switched back to the present, and Andrew admitted he could not give the angels to himself. Hired to clean offices by the uncle of one of Andrew's friends, the gang was working when Manh and Cu-Den mentioned a girl at the high school who used to pass as a boy, and they were astonished when Andrew claimed not to have heard this famous story. In Chapter 31, "Blushing-Winter," Andrew rode out of Hanoi but encountered and barely avoided a truck in the traffic that hit and killed a dog. Men from a restaurant that featured dog meat pulled the carcass off the road. Andrew passed through a village where children, thinking he was Russian, threw stones at him. South of Hanoi, he took a room in a village, and went on a sightseeing trip on the river. The quiet beauty of the scenery affected him deeply.

Chapters 32-35

Chapters 32-35 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 32, "Vietnamese-Karma," began in 1989, when Andrew was visiting San Jose from school at UCLA. The family was observing the anniversary of Grandpa Pham's death, and Andrew was bringing Grandma Le to the gathering. Grandma Le had never been happy about the poor treatment of Anh, who was her daughter and Andrew's mother, from Andrew's father's side of the family. Andrew was wary of a family flare-up, but he had no money, was secretly living out of his car, and was looking forward to the feast that awaited them. Grandma Pham lived with her married daughters and youngest son in a house in Cupertino. Andrew's uncles were at the gathering, but he never had much in common with them. As the family sat around talking about money and investments, Andrew gorged himself. Andrew's father criticized his sister about getting welfare money, and she retorted that she never criticized him about how he made his money. A huge argument broke out, ruining the party. Afterward, Andrew asked Grandma Le to tell him how his parents made their money. She hesitated, and then began the story as the chapter ended.

In Chapter 33, "Ill-Wind," three drunk Vietnamese on a motorbike were harassing Andrew as he cycled on the dangerous Highway 1 out of Hanoi. They waylaid him but calmed down when they realized he was Vietnamese-American and not Japanese, as they had suspected. Andrew offered them Marlboro cigarettes and they were fine. On the way to Ky An village, he met a one-legged cyclist whose ability astonished him. The man put him up in his humble hut for the night, serving him a Vietnamese staple dinner, clay-pot catfish. Andrew woke up in the morning with a fever. The man rubbed mentholated ointment on his back, and they talked about the Vietnam War. The man said he did not hate Americans, who were in a foreign land that took their spirit.

Chapter 34, "War-Survivors," was set in San Jose in the early 1990s. Andrew was having dinner with his then-girlfriend, Trieu, and her father. A colonel in South Vietnam's army during the war, he had put Trieu up for adoption when she was a toddler, and she had only known him now for a year. Trieu's mother had died in the war, and the Colonel had remarried. Trieu doted on the Colonel, but Andrew did not trust him, knowing he was manipulative and that he still wanted to marry her off to a rich ex-boyfriend. The Colonel and his wife now worked as live-in caretakers for an old man with dementia, but the gruesome stories he told of his war experiences showed Andrew the Colonel's bad side. Later that night, Trieu asked Andrew to sneak back into the house and stay with her. He did so, and she confessed that the Colonel had tried to molest her, which outraged Andrew. He left the house early in the morning to avoid detection, but the Colonel heard him in the yard, yelled, and went for his guns as Andrew escaped.

In Chapter 35, "Harlot-Heroine," Andrew took a couple of tours around the Vietnamese imperial city of Hue, tipped the guides hugely, and reflected on the neediness of the Vietnamese people, whose principal goal was simply to survive. Later, an elderly

professor Andrew met on a street corner told him that Vietnam's national heroine was a prostitute named Kieu whose story was more than two centuries old. He said she was selfless, had dignity and a sense of humor, all of which were classic Vietnamese traits. Andrew reflected silently that the Vietnamese might have lost themselves in capitalism. Later, he met a group of Western tourists at a bar who had toured the war's demilitarized zone (DMZ). One of the guides asked Andrew about American veterans of the Vietnam War, and he told about a vet he had met in a California coffee shop, who said he did not hate the Vietnamese, but he hated America for ignoring or criticizing him after his return from the war. Before the vet left the restaurant, he shook Andrew's hand and wished him luck.

Chapters 36-39

Chapters 36-39 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 36 is another "Fallen-Leaves" chapter, going back to when An was four, holding a toy six-shot gun and pretending to hide from red-Indians under a table covered in sheets. A woman and man came into the room, laughing, and he saw their clothes fall to the floor. An's father had told him not to come into this room, and he knew this was bad. The table began to rock and creak. This chapter provided a veiled answer to Andrew's question of Grandma Le at the end of Chapter 32 about how his parents had made their money.

In Chapter 37, "Gaping-Fish," Andrew encountered no trouble going by bicycle over a notoriously dangerous mountain pass outside Hue, although later he came upon a woman who had fainted in the road. Nobody in the crowd around her would help until Andrew gave money for a young man with a motorcycle to take her home. He stayed overnight in the town of Hoi An, an unusually gentle and happy place famous for its cuisine. He met a German businessman in a restaurant, and they shared a table at which the chef told them the story of his best dish, calling Gaping Fish. He said he could paralyze the fish with bamboo sticks and boil it alive, keeping its head out of the oil. He would watch its eyes to tell if it was about to die, and then serve it alive. If it did not gape at the table when the bamboo sticks were removed, it was dead, and there was no charge to the diners. This story was symbolic of Andrew's concern that the Vietnamese, in struggling to survive, may have killed their own spirit. The next day, Andrew saw the German at some ruins that had become a tourist trap, which again symbolized the Vietnamese sell-out. Andrew then toured the town for a couple of days with an Australian woman he had met in Hue. She thought Vietnam was beautiful, but he thought that was because her images were not clothed in rags, as his were.

Chapter 38, "Chi-Minh," described the return of Andrew's sister to the family home after fourteen years of survival on the streets, and an operation that had changed her into a man named Minh. Andrew, who had finished school and become an engineer, was as nervous as Minh during the reunion, which was attended by all the family members. Minh had married and had become a welder, but he recently had been laid off during a downsizing, and he and his wife, who knew nothing of his past, got a divorce. The author gleaned a sketch of Minh's life from him, which ended with his enrollment in a cosmetology school in San Jose. He did not go to the school, however, and began binge drinking. He went back to southern California for an attempted reconciliation with his ex-wife, but returned to Grandma Le's house and hanged himself. The author felt that his family had never been able to love him, although they mourned his passing.

In Chapter 39, "Fever-Ride," began with a description of a hotel that was so foul, Andrew threw the reeking blanket and pillow into the hallway and slept in his clothes. He had ended up there because two college students had invited him to stay at their house, but their father, a government official, would not let him stay because he was

Vietnamese-American and that might not look good to the man's colleagues. The next morning, Andrew rode 110 miles to another town, arriving exhausted and unwell. He ended up in another room that stunk, with a rat coming out of the floor drain. He had bloody diarrhea, and prostitutes scratched at his door, trying to get in. The next morning, a guide pestered him as he bought dysentery pills at the pharmacy. Andrew felt so besieged that he got on his bike and left town immediately.

Chapters 40-43

Chapters 40-43 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 40 was a "Fallen-Leaves," in which little An was locked inside a chain-link cage with his mother, who received rent from women who waved at An. The cook brought him pizza, a favorite item on the menu among the GIs, but An did not like it. He asked about the money and his mother said it was theirs, and it would be used to take him to America, where he would study to become a great engineer.

Chapter 41, "Coca-Cola," began with the author's admission that he had drunk two or three Cokes every day during eight months of biking, and that Coke was everywhere in Vietnam. When he stopped at a small shop for a Coke, three drunken soldiers recognized his Vietnamese-American accent and became enraged that he was too good to drink the Coke with ice in it, which he knew would make him sick. They accosted him when the most drunken one tried to attack him, the man fell down and threw up. Across the street, three other soldiers saw this spectacle and ridiculed the first three. A fight broke out among the six soldiers, during which Andrew sped away, feeling unwanted by both Vietnam and America.

Chapter 42, "Brother-Brother," began with Andrew breaking the news to his mother that his brother, Huy, was gay. When Huy and his boyfriend, Sean, came to Thanksgiving dinner at the house with the rest of Andrew's family, their mother pretended they were merely friends. Andrew's other gay brother, Hien, kept very quiet. Andrew's father simply ate dinner, which was a mixture of foods but not turkey, because the family had never learned to cook it properly. The author shifted back in time to two months before Thanksgiving, when Huy had announced to him that he was gay. Andrew took it well, which greatly relieved Huy, and they both felt happy speaking plainly to each other.

In Chapter 43, "Father-Son," Andrew's father lamented that he should have taken Huy and Hien to prostitutes, as his own brothers had urged him to do. By this time, Chi had died long ago and Andrew was soon to leave on his cycling trip. His father was considering retirement but wanted to keep busy, because he had too many regrets. He confessed to Andrew that he should not have beaten his children, and that he did it because his father had beaten him. He thought he had done it to show his children the right way to live, but now he confessed that he was abusive, which Andrew wished mightily that he had not said. His father had endured much, and had continually changed himself to survive. The author recalled that after the death of Grandpa Pham, the opium addict, Andrew's father had taped a short article on a lampshade that remained in place for a decade. The article was about a man who regretted never having told his father he loved him.

Chapters 44-46 and Epilogue

Chapters 44-46 and Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Chapter 44 was titled "Viet-Kieu," which meant Vietnamese-American. Andrew was cycling toward the beachfront city of Nha Trang, his mother's favorite town. He stayed at a government-run hotel and ate in the Vietnamese part of town, although he had been having stomach troubles for three months. After dinner, he went to a hotel to meet a friend from Saigon named Cuong who was supposed to be there. Cuong, a travel guide, said he had changed his named to Calvin, which was the suggestion Andrew had made when asked to provide an American name. He had not liked calling Andrew a Viet-Kieu, which he said could be used as an insult. As the two friends talked, Andrew asked Calvin if he wanted to go to America. Calvin said yes, but just for a visit, because in Vietnam, he was a king. He asked if Andrew really felt like an American, and Andrew said sometimes he did. Calvin suggested that Andrew was already lost to the Vietnamese people, especially because he was ashamed by the poverty and squalor, as all Westerners were. They parted in a friendly manner, and then Andrew encountered a beautiful Vietnamese woman on the beach, but it turned out she was a prostitute.

In Chapter 45, "Chi-Me," the author recounted his final moments with Minh, who used to be his sister, Chi. They talked about the star fruits they used to eat from the tree in Vietnam, and how much better they were than the imported ones people could buy now. Andrew asked if he was okay, and Minh said he was just trying to work things out. Andrew later thought perhaps he should have said more, but his longest-lasting memory of that moment was the catch in Minh's voice. Andrew reflected that he sometimes still thought of Minh, of star fruits, and dying angels.

Chapter 46, "Blue-Peace," went back to the cycling trip, and Andrew's encounter with a dried-up landscape after Nha Trang. The land was featureless and everyone was poor. He was approaching the end of his journey, Phan Thiet, the town where he was born. At the ocean, he was gripped by melancholy, thinking of Chi-Minh. He waded into the ocean, and was soon joined by a laughing old woman, who spoke to him in unintelligible English, and then tried French, and then spoke in Vietnamese about the beauty of the day. To each language, Andrew just smiled and nodded, feeling content as someone who moved in between cultures and languages. He thought of Tyle, the Vietnam vet he had met in Mexico. Perhaps if Tyle were here, Andrew thought, he would realize that the intention or desire to mend wrongs is enough, because the wrongs can never be undone, and the moment is all that is.

In the "Epilogue," Andrew was back in Saigon with his Uncle Hung and a pimp named Son. All three men were raging drunk, and Son wanted Andrew to go with one of his prostitutes as a gift before he returned to America. Andrew laughingly refused, and Hung drove him on the back of his motorcycle to the airport. In 22 hours, he was back in San Francisco, with a planeload of immigrating Vietnamese. He looked out the window

of the airplane as it circled to land, and a Vietnamese man next to him asked if this was America. Andrew replied that it was, and added with a smile, "Welcome home."

Characters

Andrew X. Pham

Andrew X. Pham, the book's author, was the central person in it. In telling the story of his bicycle trip through Vietnam, he also reflected extensively on his upbringing and current relationship with his family. Through these scenes, it became apparent that challenging circumstances, prejudices, and violence had caused Andrew to develop a major problem with anger. Beaten regularly by his father, he started beating his younger brothers in return. As a teenage immigrant from Vietnam in California, he encountered racial prejudice and joined a gang that fought with gangs of other ethnic groups. During his cycling trip, he was threatened by young toughs on a number of occasions, and each time he had to stifle the urge to lash out, which would have been disastrous. The other side of Andrew's character was his sensitivity. He empathized with the difficulties of his family members and of many people he met on the road. He was a good listener, and took the stories he heard to heart. He felt strongly about several young women with whom he was romantically involved during the course of the story. He often displayed an intense appreciation of nature, and he reveled in the sense of wonderment it could evoke. His feelings about the displacement of being a Vietnamese-American were complex, and he explored them thoroughly, trying his best to understand himself. This intelligence and openness to experience did not translate into wisdom, perhaps because Andrew was still young when he wrote this book, but he was a likeable and engaging character.

Pham Van Thong

Pham Van Thong was Andrew's father and the biggest influence on Andrew's life in this book. Thong went through many changes in the course of the story, and the facets of his character emerged in pieces that were provided at different stages of his life as the book progressed. In the end, the picture that materialized was of a person born into poverty in Vietnam who had a loving and happy relationship with his young wife, even though they lived in squalor. They worked hard and had hopes for the future. Pham had an important job in the area of propaganda in the Vietnamese National Army, but he was imprisoned by the enemy, suffering terrible conditions and constant fear of death that changed him by the time of his release. He became frightened, and willing to do whatever was necessary to survive. His value system had been compromised by his narrow escape from death, and Thong became so fixated on the goal of reaching middle class security that he started a prostitution service to reach that goal. He made enough money to bring the family to America and give Andrew a good education, but he had become an angry man who beat his children, thinking he was teaching them the right way to live. At the same time, he became fawning and emotionally beaten by the wealthier Americans whose company he wished to join. Only later in life did Pham recognize that abuse by his father had led to his habit of abusing his own children, for

which he was regretful. Indeed, Pham's burden for the choices he made under the taxing circumstances of his life was the feeling that he was full of regrets.

Chi/Minh

Chi/Minh was Andrew's older sister when she was named Chi, who as an adult went through a sex change operation and became Minh. As Chi, she never fit into the world comfortably. She had conflicts with her father, whose rigid rules of conduct she opposed, and he responded by beating her. She went to live with her grandmother and, as a teenager, she bound her breasts to conceal them and passed as a boy in high school. She was kind to Andrew, who loved her in return, but she soon ran away to live on the streets of San Francisco, disappearing for 17 years from the lives of her family. Returning as a 31 year-old man named Minh, he was secretive about those years away. Minh tried to lead a normal life, with marriage and a job, but he was confused and uncertain about himself. When he was laid off work and his wife left him, he fell apart. He still tried to pull himself together, but could not find his way, and ended by committing suicide. In the book, Chi/Minh was the symbol of what can happen to people who are not given enough love and who therefore have trouble expressing love themselves. Even at the end, before Minh's suicide, the conversation between his closest sibling, Andrew, and him was constrained by their habit of being emotionally closed to each other. Minh was a victim of extremely difficult circumstances who, in the end, failed to summon enough resolve and self-confidence to overcome those circumstances and find meaning in life.

Grandma Le

Grandma Le was the mother of Andrew's mother. She was small and birdlike, but sturdy. As time progressed in the book, she became older and more frail, but she retained a strength of character that had a big impact on Andrew. Grandma Le functioned in the family as a source of refuge for Andrew and his sister, Chi, when they were beaten by their father. Her home was a sanctuary with which they associated plentiful food and emotional warmth. For a good part of her youth, Chi lived with Grandma Le, and after Chi got a sex change operation as an adult to become Minh, he came back and lived with Grandma Le again for a time. Grandma Le also was the one who finally told Andrew that his parents had made their money through a prostitution business, which led him to recall events when he was about four years old that he realized were related to that business. Grandma Le was a staunch defender of her own daughter, Anh, who always was criticized as a spouse by the siblings of Andrew's father. She was the most sensible and strongest female character in the book.

Anh

Anh was Andrew's mother. She was a presence in the book as a loving wife and mother, but she also had a tough side. Anh was portrayed as subservient to her husband, yet

when the family escaped by boat from Vietnam and the crewmen tried to rebel, it was Anh who forced them back in line by saying she would not pay them if they took the boat to Thailand rather than to Malaysia, as planned. Also, when Andrew discovered later in the book how his parents had made their money, the early memories that returned to him included Anh controlling the funds from the prostitutes, and telling Andrew that the money would be used to give him a good education in America. Like her husband, she was a survivor, a hard worker, and a fighter. Also like Thong, she was not good at expressing her love for her family.

Uncle Hung

Uncle Hung, a brother of Andrew's mother, was the one among his numerous uncles with whom he had the most active relationship in this book. Uncle Hung made a last-minute decision to stay in Vietnam with Andrew's Grandma Le when the family escaped the country. When Andrew returned to Saigon on his cycling trip, he shared Hung's room, and the two went out on the town together often. Hung, who made wedding videos for a living, was a plump man who liked to laugh, but he also was a big drinker who frequented prostitutes and always spent everything he had. His wife and daughter had moved to Virginia, but Hung was having trouble getting there to join them. Andrew considered Hung to be unstable, and he saw the seedy side of Singapore life in the company of his uncle.

Auntie Dung

Auntie Dung was Hung's sister. She was 20 years old and eager to escape Vietnam when the family left. She was friends with Chi, and when the two were solicited to become prostitutes while the family was at a refugee center in Indonesia, Auntie Dung took the initiative to get the two of them away from trouble. She also later sponsored her mother and her brother, Hung, to come to America.

Viet

Viet was another of Andrew's uncles. He spent time with Andrew when he returned to Saigon, and Andrew found him to be the most likeable of his uncles. Viet was the only one who thought Andrew could make it by bicycle to Hanoi. He was a chemist and had started a bottled soft drink business, but Coca-Cola and Pepsi were soon to run him into bankruptcy.

Khuong

Khuong was the other uncle with whom Andrew spent time upon his return to Vietnam. He was a slim and good-humored man in his early 30s.

Trieu

Trieu was Andrew's girlfriend, a Vietnamese-American he met when living in California. She had lost her mother during the war, and her soldier father put her up for adoption. Trieu had known her father only for about a year during the time that she was with Andrew. She seemed to be a rather impassive young woman, although her personality was not thoroughly sketched in the book. Eventually, Trieu ran off with another man, to Andrew's deep dismay.

The Colonel

The Colonel was the father of Trieu. He had held powerful positions in the Vietnamese National Army and liked to tell war stories, which Andrew thought revealed the man's brutality. The Colonel and his wife were living in San Jose when Andrew met them, working as live-in helpers to a man with dementia. During a regular Friday night dinner with the Colonel, his wife, and Trieu, Andrew discovered that the Colonel recently had attempted to molest Trieu, from whom he had been estranged for years.

Huy

Huy was one of Andrew's younger brothers. Andrew beat Huy up once and got in trouble with their father, after which Huy and Andrew did not have much to do with each other for a long while. Huy lived in Berkeley with a male lover, and only told Andrew that he was gay just after Huy's graduation from college. They had a talk about it, and Huy was greatly relieved to realize that Andrew would not judge him.

Hien

Hien was another of Andrew's brothers. Like Huy, he was gay. He did not tell anyone about it during the course of the book but somehow the word got out, because his father mentioned toward the end of the book that he should have taken Huy and Hien to prostitutes.

Tien

Tien, also Andrew's brother, was the one who took him to San Francisco to begin his bicycle tour up the coast to Seattle, from where he flew to Vietnam. Tien did not play a big role in the book, although he once asked Andrew if he would ever consider suicide, and he appeared late in the book at a family reunion.

Kay

Kay was Andrew's little sister. She was born in America after the family immigrated there, and she was the only one who spoke English with no trace of a foreign accent. She was thoroughly relaxed and comfortable in America, unlike everyone else in her family.

Grandpa Pham

Grandpa Pham was Andrew's grandfather on his father's side. The major impression he made on Andrew in the book was as an opium addict whose smoking was a ritual that made the household on tiptoe when the family lived in Vietnam. Later in the book, the author recounted that Grandpa Pham used to regularly cane Thong, Andrew's father.

Grandma Pham

Grandma Pham was the second wife of Grandpa Pham. She came with the rest of the family to America and lived with several of her children in California.

Grandpa Le

Grandpa Le, the husband of Andrew's Grandma Le, made a fortune in fish sauce in Andrew's home town before he died.

Cu-Den

Cu-Den was one of Andrew's friends in the Vietnamese-American gang with which he ran during his high school years in San Jose.

Manh

Manh was another friend in Andrew's high school gang. A big, powerful young man, he was the best fighter. He also was a thief. His uncle, who had a janitorial business, gave the boys part-time jobs cleaning offices.

Ho Chi Minh

Ho Chi Minh was the founder of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the president of North Vietnam until his death in 1969. During Andrew's cycling trip to Vietnam, he viewed the mummified remains of "Uncle Ho."

Kim

Kim was a beautiful taxi dancer, or hospitality girl, whom Andrew met in a bar in the village of Vung Tau. He spent several days with her, and she unsuccessfully tried to convince him to take her with him back to America.

Patty

Patty was a young woman Andrew met in Mexico and later visited at her place in Portland.

Ronnie

Ronnie was Patty's friend, whom Andrew visited in Corvallis, Oregon. To his surprise, she had been in a mental institution and was still half-crazy.

Wong

Wong was a Chinese jade-cutter and longtime resident of the Jakarta refugee compound in which Andrew and his family stayed after their escape from Vietnam. Wong befriended Andrew, but later committed suicide.

Cuong

Cuong was a Vietnamese tour guide who became friends with Andrew. Cuong changed his name to Calvin, so that American tourists could more easily relate to him. He thought that Andrew, as a Vietnamese-America, was forever lost to his home country.

Objects/Places

Saigon

Saigon, a city of the former South Vietnam that is now known in unified Vietnam as Ho Chi Minh City, was where Andrew Pham lived as a boy before his family escaped Vietnam by boat. They left just as Saigon was falling to the Viet Cong in 1975, and the book has several descriptions of the chaos and danger in the streets of that time. The other face of Saigon in the book is as the contemporary Ho Chi Minh City, where Andrew stayed with extended family during his bicycle tour of the country. He described the poverty, the exoticism, and the decadence of the city today, often comingling these impressions with his memories from childhood of the city that he persisted throughout the book in calling Saigon.

San Jose

San Jose was the California city where the Pham family eventually lived after their immigration to America. They lived in a poor, seedy part of town, and Andrew was involved in gang fights and other wrongheaded activities during high school there. The city did not have entirely bad connotations for Andrew, however, as he later returned for a family reunion and visited his beloved Grandma Le, who had moved there from Vietnam after the rest of the family arrived.

Phan Thiet

Phan Thiet, nicknamed the fish sauce capital, was the fishing town in Vietnam where Andrew was born and lived in early boyhood. Many of his best memories of childhood were made there, but much had changed when he returned, such as his family home having been turned into a motorcycle repair shop.

Hanoi

Hanoi was the city in Vietnam to which Andrew planned to cycle from Saigon. The trip was considered extremely dangerous for a long cyclist. Andrew went there mostly by train but cycled back from Hanoi to Saigon.

Minh Luong Prison

Minh Luong Prison was where Andrew's father was imprisoned during the Vietnam War, before the family escaped from the country. Andrew used to watch his father being forced to search through minefields, where many prisoners were maimed and killed by

explosions. When Andrew went back to visit, he found that a town had grown up around the ruins of the prison.

Rach Gia

Rach Gia was a town outside Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, where Andrew went en route to his visit to Minh Luong Prison. On the bus to Rach Gia, he narrowly avoided a dangerous fight with two men selling a cure-all potion.

Hue

Hue was the Vietnamese imperial city where Andrew took tours and reflected on how contemporary Vietnam had prostituted itself to capitalism and the influence of America through the war in Vietnam.

Shreveport

Shreveport was the town in Louisiana where the Pham family first lived upon arrival in America, under the care of a Baptist church group. Before long, the family moved to California.

The Jakarta Compound

The Jakarta Compound was a refugee camp in Indonesia where the Pham family stayed after their escape from Vietnam, before they immigrated to America.

Vung Tau

Vung Tau was a beach village in Vietnam where Andrew met and spent several days with a beautiful hospitality girl named Kim.

Cupertino

Cupertino was the California town where Grandma Pham lived with her married daughters and her youngest son after they immigrated to America.

Portland

Portland was the Oregon city in which Andrew enjoyed a great party at the house of Patty, whom he had met in Mexico.

Corvallis

Corvallis was the city in Oregon where Andrew stayed overnight with a girlfriend of Patty named Ronnie, who had been in a mental institution and still seemed disturbingly unbalanced.

Tokyo

Tokyo was the city in Japan where Andrew landed for a 45-day layover on his flight to Vietnam. He had a great deal of trouble finding his way out of the airport at Narita on his bicycle.

Themes

Caught Between Cultures

This book's principal theme was the sense of abandonment or being cut adrift that can accompany permanent relocation from one's home country to a completely different culture. The author's main problem in the book was that he felt as if he no longer belonged in Vietnam, yet did not feel entirely comfortable in America. This problem was worsened by the effects of the Vietnam War. In its aftermath, living conditions for former South Vietnamese in the unified Vietnam were generally not good. On Andrew's bicycle trip through the country, he was frequently dismayed by the poverty of the people. Their neediness seemed to him to have caused them to prostitute themselves in various ways, sometimes literally, and sometimes only in terms of their dignity. He often felt reviled by them, and was ashamed of his revulsion. For their part, the Vietnamese often regarded Andrew as a rich, self-satisfied traitor to his origins. Many of them stereotyped all Vietnamese-Americans in this way. In the parts of the book that were set in America, Andrew often encountered racism that was sometimes overt and sometimes indirect. On his bicycle, people threw things at him and called him names. At work, the boss patted him on the head and said he liked Asians because they worked hard. The effects on Andrew of this sense of displacement were extreme. His moods could be volatile, and he feared that he was stony at the core. For the author, belonging nowhere was a source of constant anxiety.

The Effects of Trauma

The Vietnam War had a huge impact on all the principal characters in this book. Most were uprooted from Vietnam by it, including the author and much of his family. Those who stayed in Vietnam dealt with repression, regrets, and the lingering effects of America's economic impact on the nation. For those who escaped, imprisonment and other abuses they endured during the war continued to haunt them for the rest of their lives. Indeed, it seemed as though the people who stayed in Vietnam were able to cope better with the aftermath of the war than those who went to America and encountered a strange, new culture. A sense of belonging seemed to help people to rationalize and better understand what had happened to them and to their nation. For the Pham family, war, poverty, and relocation created many long-lived problems. On one level, the book seemed to be a testament to the insurmountability of serious trauma. Andrew and many of his family members were emotionally injured for years after their escape from Vietnam. The worst effect of all was that on Andrew's sister, Chi, who had a transsexual operation to become a man named Minh, and then committed suicide. The author does not suggest that the trauma of war or the family's other difficult circumstances caused the gender change, but he does strongly indicate that displacement from one country to another created great stress in Minh's life and contributed to the suicide. Another marked effect of trauma was the violence of Andrew's father, Thong, who was beaten as a child by his father and subsequently abused his own children. Thong's prison

experiences in Vietnam frightened him deeply, and living in America turned him into a fawning and obsequious person around white people. He admitted his life was full of regrets, and much of what he did that he regretted had its origins in trauma.

Family Dysfunction

The dysfunctional family is a staple theme of literature, and the extended family portrayed in this book was a classic example. The side of the family from which Andrew's father came did not approve of Andrew's mother, and the dysfunction grew from there. It was as if Romeo had married Juliet, and now both families had to deal with it. The upheaval of the war and the devastation it brought to Vietnam further complicated the family's dynamics. The imprisonment of Andrew's father during the war created great stress. Later, many family members escaped Vietnam and eventually went to America, but others stayed at home, which caused more rifts to develop. Some of those who stayed came belatedly to the United States, but the old wounds had merely festered in the intervening years. Different family members had different experiences coping with the new, unified Vietnam or with their relocation to America. Separated and stressed in these various ways, the family did not come together against a common enemy, because there was no such thing. The circumstances of their difficult lives had exacerbated the conflicts they already had with each other, and when the family reunited in San Jose, the atmosphere soon turned ugly. As the story's narrator, Andrew took sides in these conflicts and got caught up in them, but was also dismayed by them. For him, the most important and symbolic dysfunction was his relationship with his abusive and yet caring father, which never reached the sort of reconciliation for which he obviously longed. In this book, the message concerning family dysfunction seemed to be that the world can be overwhelming and can drive loved ones apart. In the end, the author seemed to conclude that only love of the moment could be counted upon, and must be grasped as a way out of the pain caused by fractured families.

Style

Perspective

This story was told entirely from the first-person viewpoint of the author, Andrew Pham. Everything and everyone he encountered, in Mexico, the USA, and Vietnam, were seen through the filter of his opinions and interpretations. The book was about both the exterior and interior lives of its author. As much as a journey through a country, it was an internal exploration of all the influences that made the man called Andrew Pham. One aspect of the book that helped to prevent the singular perspective of the author from becoming tedious was that it spanned years of his life, going back to when he was a toddler. The perspectives, therefore, were quite different throughout the book, because they variously came from a little child, a preteen, a teenager, and a young man. Moreover, the story was not presented chronologically, which meant that these viewpoints shifted back and forth throughout the narrative. Also, the story contained plenty of action and movement, which often guided the reader's attention away from Andrew and toward external events or other people. The author included many conversations, sometimes long ones, which provided other viewpoints. In places, he obviously did research to provide factual information that he would not have known off the top of his head. In these ways, the consistency of Andrew's perspective was effectively diluted or diminished, so that it never seemed like a one-eyed view of Vietnam and America, even though it was clearly one man's personal experience.

Tone

The author vacillated between two basic moods throughout this book, although between them lay many small variations in tone. The two moods were anger and longing. Andrew Pham's anger, accompanied by a tendency to violence, sprang from the difficult circumstances of his life and his estrangement from both the country of his birth and his adoptive country. Growing up, he was caned regularly by his father, and Andrew soon took to beating his younger brothers. During his high school years, he was in a gang of Vietnamese-Americans who fought regularly with gangs comprising other ethnic groups. On his cycling trip, he was confronted on several occasions by threatening men, and his typical reaction was to stifle the desire to lash out, because he was outnumbered. This tone of frustration and bitterness pervaded the book, yet it was offset by the gentler side of the author's nature, which often manifested in wistfulness. He longed for a kinder life, for love, and for happy futures for his family members. Even in the midst of experiencing the letdown of the American dream, Andrew still hoped it might one day come true. He wanted to belong, and to be accepted. The angry young man hoped to shed his ire, replacing it with a sense of security and well-being. On a number of occasions, Andrew's appreciation of nature seemed to be an avenue toward achieving the balance he sought. This contrast between anger and longing lent tension and complexity to the book's tone, which, in turn, increased the story's unpredictability and excitement.

Structure

The most significant aspect of this book's structure is the author's deliberate jumbling of chronology. For example, over the first six chapters of the book, he begins on a bicycling trip through Mexico in the recent past, then revisits his childhood in the 1970s, goes back to his parents' life in 1961, follows that with what happened after his Mexico trip, goes back to the 1960s, and finally comes to the present. For the rest of the book, the author maintains this pattern of jumping back and forth through time, which is his principal method of providing variation in the narrative. Throughout the book's 46 chapters, the reader never can be sure what year during the past half-century in which the next chapter will be set, but the structure is not haphazard. Gradually, a pattern emerges of storylines that are principally constrained by time. One narrative thread is Andrew's contemporary story, a second includes the stories of his family's escape from Vietnam and immigration to America, and the third is the first years of his parents' marriage, including his own early childhood before the fall of Saigon. These storylines eventually merge into the final chapters that end with the author's life to date. This structure, reminiscent of fiction, even though the story is entirely nonfiction, is a major contributor to the book's complexity and the sense of anticipation or curiosity generated in the reader.

Quotes

"A man once revealed something which disturbed me too much to be discounted. He said, 'Your sister died because she became too American.'" Chapter 1, "Exile-Pilgrim," page 7.

"It seemed, then, that we could simply walk out of Vietnam and right into America, beautiful free America, somewhere at the end of this wondrous road." Chapter 8, "Last-Gamble," page 61.

"But for my parents' money, I could be any one of the thousands of cyclo drivers, vacant-eyed men wilting in cafes, hollow-cheeked merchants angling for a sale." Chapter 15, "Beggar-Grace," page 107.

"My Saigon was a whore, a saint, an infanticidal maniac. She sold her body to any taker, dreams of a better future, visions turned inward, eyes to the sky of the skyscrapers foreign to the land, away from the festering sores at her feet." Chapter 15, "Beggar-Grace," page 109.

"Who ever heard of a grown man 'doing' a sport? A solo sport and no prize! Bafflement plainly on their faces." Chapter 18, "Gift-Marriage," page 124.

"I said I probably wouldn't see him in heaven since he was Vietnamese, but I hoped he didn't get reincarnated as a donkey. They say people who hit others too much will come back as donkeys so others can hit them back." Chapter 21, "Baptizing-Buddha," page 169.

"Red-faced men talk-shouted, tearing into dog ribs with their teeth and tossing the bones on the muddy floor. The owner, a mean-faced old woman, took my money and handed me a small plate of roasted dog meat, the pieces cut thin like nickels." Chapter 31, "Blushing-Winter," page 243.

"Between the sheer blackened cliffs, the winter sun freezes, a soft pink violet in the misty sky, a painter's fancy, a moment thought impossible and forgotten upon passing." Chapter 31, "Blushing-Winter," page 246.

"Sedentary suburbia had fat-armored his five-foot-three structure to two hundred pounds. Muscles shelved his shoulders, sloping to the dome mountain that was his head of baling-wire hair, a galvanized gray." Chapter 34, "War-Survivors," page 268.

"The vague sketch of Minh's life I gleaned during my brief time with him seems trivial, more a testament to my stony core than anything attributable to him." Chapter 38, "Chi-Minh," page 297.

"Ten minutes later, they are back at my door, whining. 'Please, mister, open. We friend. Yoo-hoo, please open. We cheap, very cheap.'" Chapter 39, "Fever-Ride," page 306.

"Fists fly, thudding into faces. They kick each other sloppily, looking absurd in their plastic flip-flops." Chapter 41, "Coca-Cola," page 314.

"After Nha Trang, the land dries up. The sky hurts with a whispering blue. The air chafes, a marine tinge, rough on its hot grainy edge." Chapter 46, "Blue-Peace," page 335.

Topics for Discussion

Andrew Pham's emotions about his Vietnamese heritage were complex. How would you describe his attitude toward the country of his birth, and why do you think he had such conflicting feelings?

Do you think the author felt comfortable as an American? Do you think he loved this country or hated it? What is your personal reaction to Andrew's feelings about America?

Just as the author's emotions about the countries in which he had lived were complicated, so were his feelings about his own family. Considering all the family encounters he described, both good and bad, how would you assess his attitude toward being part of his family, and toward the history of his family's struggles?

The Phams had trouble expressing affection. There was probably more than one reason for this reticence. What reasons can you give that would help to explain it?

Give examples of the author's expressions of anger in this book, and tell how you think he tried to cope with his anger over the course of the story.

Andrew's girlfriend, Trieu, apparently left him for another man. He also had several encounters with young women on the road, none of which amounted to much. What conclusions would you draw from his love life about his frame of mind, and what kind of person he was at the time of these events?

In the end, what do you think Andrew took away from his journey through Vietnam? Do you think it helped him to reconcile his past with his present life, and if so, how?

Catfish and Mandala contains several scenes concerning catfish, but does not deal much with mandalas. Why do you think the author chose this title for the book? What does it mean to you?