

The Lotus Eaters: A Novel Study Guide

The Lotus Eaters: A Novel by Tatjana Soli

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Plot Summary

The book begins with a quote from Homer's most famous work, "The Odyssey."

"...we reached the country of the Lotus-eaters, a race that eat the flowery Lotus fruit...Now these natives had no intention of killing my comrades; what they did was to give them some Lotus to taste. Those who ate the honeyed fruit of the plant lost any wish to come back and bring us news. All they now wanted was to stay where they were with the Lotus-eaters, to browse on the Lotus, and to forget all thoughts of return..." (Preface).

The protagonist, Helen Adams is the main character in Tatjana Soli's "The Lotus Eaters." Helen is a naïve girl that arrives in Vietnam from her home in California. Helen's interest in the war began with her father's experiences in Korea and then her brother's death while serving with the Marines. Helen decides that she wants to become a combat photographer and eventually lands a job with Life Magazine. Helen meets the experienced and worldly Sam Darrow, a Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist not known for his soft fuzzy side. Darrow takes Helen under his wing and teaches her the ins and outs of her new job.

Through Darrow, Helen meets Linh, a Vietnamese deserter who has become a photographer. Linh and Helen work together and eventually fall in love after Darrow's death.

At the beginning of the story, Helen and her husband, Linh, have been covering the Vietnam War as combat photographers for many years. The first scene takes place during the fall of Saigon. Helen, an American photojournalist, is determined to get photos of the end of the decade-long conflict in Vietnam. At the beginning of the story, she is traversing the streets, trying to get back to the apartment she shares with her Vietnamese husband, Linh. Although the way, Helen takes a few snap shots and is stunned by the looting and chaos that fills the streets.

For three years Helen had taken pictures in Vietnam. However, not many people were interested in pictures of the destroyed country. So Helen and Linh began covering humanitarian stories as well as the ensuing crisis in Cambodia. Since that time the Khmer Rouge had taken over Cambodia. However, when South Vietnam finally fell a photo essay would be in high demand. Some of Helen and Linh's exploits are covered. Both know that it is time to get out of Saigon. Linh had been injured which would make it difficult to evacuate the city.

After a difficult and dangerous trek to the embassy, Helen puts Linh on a helicopter and sends him on while she returns to photograph the invasion of the NVA and the changeover of the government. Linh knows that Helen has become addicted to war.

In many ways, The Lotus Eaters is a coming of age tale. Helen had left college to go to Vietnam. She wanted to ensure that she could get there before the war ended. The



foreign country and patriarchal society are excruciatingly difficult for Helen. However, Helen learns well under Darrow's wing and with the assistance of Linh. Helen watches while her adopted country is war-torn and ruined. Soli details how the war and the country have changed Helen and how Helen changed Linh.



chapters 1-3

chapters 1-3 Summary

The book begins with a quote from Homer's most famous work, "The Odyssey."

"...we reached the country of the Lotus-eaters, a race that eat the flowery Lotus fruit....Now these natives had no intention of killing my comrades; what they did was to give them some Lotus to taste. Those who ate the honeyed fruit of the plant lost any wish to come back and bring us news. All they now wanted was to stay where they were with the Lotus-eaters, to browse on the Lotus, and to forget all thoughts of return" (Preface).

"The city teetered in a dream state." (Chapter 1, p. 1).

The protagonist, Helen is introduced. The city of Saigon is in danger of falling. Helen, an American photojournalist, is determined to get photos of the end of the decade-long conflict in Vietnam. At the beginning of the story, she is traversing the streets, trying to get back to the apartment she shares with her Vietnamese lover, Linh. Although the way, Helen takes a few snap shots and is stunned by the looting and chaos that fills the streets. Helen finds a lost little girl and does not know what to do with her. The girl, only three or four years old, wails and cannot seem to calm down. She is unable to tell Helen where her mother might be. The mother intercepts Helen and takes the girl, much to Helen's relief.

Normally, the streets are so filled with people that the eye does not know which direction to go. On this day, Helen does not have this problem.

"They woke to the crumping sound of mortars on the edge of the city. She rose and was in motion, a prickling of adrenaline that she recognized when an operation was about to take place." (Chapter 1, p. 18).

For three years Helen had taken pictures in Vietnam. However, not many people were interested in pictures of the destroyed country. So Helen and Linh began covering humanitarian stories as well as the ensuing crisis in Cambodia. Since that time the Khmer Rouge had taken over Cambodia. However, when South Vietnam finally fell a photo essay would be in high demand. Some of Helen and Linh's exploits are covered. Both know that it is time to get out of Saigon. Linh had been injured which would make it difficult to evacuate the city. Helen has a couple more pictures she wants to take but Linh thinks it is time to go. Helen gets ready to leave the apartment and Linh tells her that if she does not return he will stay. Helen says that she will return. Helen goes to the Saigon River and meets up with Matt Tanner and a new photographer Matt Clark. Tanner asks if Helen is staying on in she says she is leaving that afternoon. Tanner talks about a party that will be held that evening but Helen says she is leaving. Tanner asks if Linh is going to go with her. Matt asks if she and Linh are married. Helen does not



answer. Tanner says he is going to stay on because he is 35 years old and still has not won a Pulitzer.

Helen returns to the apartment where she sees a small boy that lives in the building. Chuong is an orphan that has been permitted to stay in the building because he runs errands for the tenants. Helen gives Chuong money which will soon be useless to her. Helen returns to the apartment where she finds that Linh has packed their belongings. Helen and Linh leave the apartment. Linh walks steadily but it is clear that he is in pain from his wound. Helen carries the luggage.

Helen is stopped on the street because she is carrying a camera. She says that they are press and should always have protection. Helen wakes up on the ground after the man head butts her with his rifle. Her camera has been stolen. Fortunately, Helen has another camera.

The author describes some of the horror that is seen on the streets on the way to the embassy including children who have been killed. Helen and Linh arrive at the embassy. A soldier does not want to allow Linh inside the embassy. Helen claims he has papers. Helen lies about Linh's identity and scolds the soldier. After a while the guard says it doesn't matter anymore lets them inside the embassy. Helen arranges for a medic for Linh. There is a long wait. Linh finally sleeps after taking more painkillers. Helen begins to worry that the Marines will not able to keep the people outside the embassy at bay. Once again Helen asks for a medic for Linh. She introduces herself to the man along with Linh.

Helen doubts soldiers will learn that her credentials have been pulled by the magazine. A soldier claims to be a big fan of Helen's and helps her to get on the medical evac chopper.

One of the Marines carries Helen's film cases on board. Helen arranges for the film cases to get on board the ship and to be given to someone from Life. Helen orders someone to take care of Linh. Helen jumps out of the helicopter leaving Linh and the film cases behind. The Marine orders Helen to get on the next helicopter out.

Just before dawn the last of the perimeter guards withdraw from the embassy. Helen follows the soldiers taking pictures. People begin to pour inside the embassy walls, flooding the compound. Helen watches and takes pictures.

"Now she walked through the same gates unopposed, ignored, made her way home down the deserted streets as if in a dream. Too incredible that the whole thing was finally over. Rumors were that the NVA would arrest any Western journalists and shoot them on the spot, the 'bloodbath' that the Americans warned of, but she feared the reality would fall something short of that." Chap. 1 p. 41.

Helen returns to her apartment. She thinks about the letter she had left for Linh and hopes that he will forgive her.

Linh, in the helicopter, thinks about the destruction of Saigon.



"This was the way one lost one's homeland. The first things lost were the sights, then the smells. Touch disappeared, and, of course, taste was quick to follow. Even the sounds of one's own language, in a foreign place, evoked only nostalgia." Chap. 2, p. 42

Linh wonders if he is dying. He thinks about his family, Mai, Darrow and the others. He thinks about Helen slipping through his fingers at the last moment.

Linh gets onto the American ship. He had been bandaged and manages to hold on despite a fever. The sickroom reminds Linh of a coffin. Although he is lightheaded he is determined to breathe the air. The ship is headed for the Philippines. Linh speaks to a member of the crew and finds out that Helen is not on board. Linh had suspected that Helen would attempt to stay for the changeover but never thought she would do it alone.

"Over the years, he doubted her love, if that love could only exist in war, if she insisted on staying partly because their love was only possible in his own country. Now he knew that she did love him. Clear now that she was as dependent as any addict on the drug of war. He had underestimated the damage in her." Chapter 1 page 43

The soldier realizes that Linh does not want to talk and hopes that perhaps Linh will have stories to tell when he's feeling better. The soldier tries to comfort Linh by saying that everyone thinks Helen is charmed and that she will get out of the country okay.

Chapter 2: Angkor - 1963

This chapter discusses Linh's life before he met Helen. Angkor is located in Binh Duong, in a location that was supposed to be safe from war. Linh was a writer and a poet. He and his wife, Mai were expecting their first child. At age 30, Linh did not want to back to war. However, he had been in the army for 4 years. He had tries to escape but had no choice. Linh knew he was much better suited to the life of a scholar than a soldier. Linh's father had been a professor of literature in Hanoi. But war changes everything. Linh knew that he may not ever see his wife or family again.

Americans had joined up with the SVA and towered over the Vietnamese. The first American Linh met was Sam Darrow, a photographer for Life Magazine. Linh introduces himself at Tran Bau Linh. Linh was impressed by Darrow's cameras. Linh's captain, Dung, insisted on having his photo taken. Darrow obliged but not before exposing and ruining the film. When Linh questioned Darrow about this action, Darrow grinned and said it would be their little secret.

The next morning bombs went off and Linh's village was destroyed as was his family. Linh saw no reason to stay and deserted the SVA. His first months in Saigon were a blur. He survived but nothing more. One day Linh saw a sign advertising help wanted. Linh said he was a friend of Darrow's and was hired. Linh was sent to Cambodia.

Linh meets Gary, assignment editor. Gary is surprised when Linh says he has worked with Darrow. Darrow is a difficult man to work with and most of his assistants quit. Gary



is not going to look too closely at someone that will do the job. Otherwise, Gary would have to do it.

Darrow is a difficult personality. He works until things are to his liking and it does not matter if anyone is inconvenienced. Linh and Darrow seem to get along well and spend a great deal of time in the jungle.

Darrow and Linh meet on a terrace. Darrow says that when they met Linh's name was Tran Bau Linh. Linh says that that man is dead and now he is Nguyen Pran Linh. Darrow says he will keep the secret. Linh will learn to trust him.

Linh tries to teach Darrow about the country and its beliefs. Darrow is still in a very foreign land. During a battle, Darrow put down his camera to save a wounded man. Back in Saigon Darrow is gloomy. According to Darrow, if there is no record of the fighting, it did not occur.

Chapter 3: A Splendid Little War

Saigon, November 1965

Linh is confronted by a man named Mr. Bao. Bao recognized Linh from earlier days and knows that Linh is a deserter. Bao requires Linh to work for the north. Linh must report Darrow's whereabouts. During one conversation, Linh spots Helen. Helen is rushing to meet her date, a reporter named Robert. Robert takes Helen to a dinner where she meets Darrow, Gary, and Linh. No one seems particularly thrilled to meet her.

The evening is spent with Helen trying to make a good impression and the others feeling her out. Darrow gives her a hard time at first, accusing her of being a looky-loo. After dinner, Helen spends a long time speaking with Darrow.

chapters 1-3 Analysis

In Chapter one the reader gets to meet the current Helen and Linh. Although they are devoted to each other, Helen is also devoted to her job and to war. It is said that: "Over the years, he doubted her love, if that love could only exist in war, if she insisted on staying partly because their love was only possible in his own country. Now he knew that she did love him. Clear now that she was as dependent as any addict on the drug of war. He had underestimated the damage in her." (Chapter 1, p. 43).

It is true that Helen is addicted to war. She liked Vietnam upon arrival. Her family connection had brought her from the U.S. to the country at the beginning of the war. Others, such as Darrow, did not take her seriously at first, partly because many people were interested in seeing what was going on but few had the guts or wherewithal to understand or brave the real action. Besides, Helen was a young female and did not have the tarnish like many of the professionals that worked in the country.



Helen manages to keep at least some of her optimism. In many ways she does seem to be charmed. Many wonder if her risks and sacrifices are worth the pay off. In Helen's mind, there are no choices. She must stay in Saigon until the very last moment. Helen believes that she will survive.

Linh's history is tragic and not uncommon for the time or that region of the world. While Linh has many interests, he has no choice but to go with the SVA or he will be killed. Linh knows he may never see his family again or how long he may be gone this time. It is difficult to leave his wife and unborn child. It is a shock when the bombs go off the morning after he leaves home. There is nothing keeping Linh in the SVA now. It does not matter what they do to him. Linh's life is all but over.

Linh does not know how his life will change when he applies for the job at Life. Darrow is a hard man to work with but he and Linh have some sort of unspoken bond. It is clear that the men will learn a great deal from each other in the coming years.

Soli also uses foreshadowing when it comes to the relationship between Darrow and Helen. The meeting between them is bordering on antagonistic. The author captures the reader's interest and makes the reader wonder where this relationship will go and how each person will be affected.



chapters 4-7

chapters 4-7 Summary

Helen and Darrow are at the Bien Hoa Air Force Base. Darrow argues with a Lieutenant when the man says he cannot take Helen aboard the aircraft. Darrow finally gets the man to agree by forgiving a gambling debt. Only for the helicopters land Helen asks Darrow to help her load film into her new cameras. Darrow is speechless at Helen's incompetence but says nothing. Darrow asks about Linh's whereabouts. Helen says he has taken a few days off. Helen and Darrow board the helicopter. Helen follows orders from the Lieutenant and watches for the enemy in the tree-line. Helen meets a young soldier named Curt who has been injured. Helen gets so frightened out in the field as she does not take a single shot. Helen argues when Darrow asks her to leave the area. On the way back to the hamlet Helen talks with Curt about surfing. Curt is determined to go back into combat.

Helen thinks about her brother Michael. "Michael. Determined to follow in their father's footsteps. To outdo him if possible. Graduated with honors. He could have done anything, but he wanted only to be in the elite corps. Because dad wasn't. Her father would have been dismissive of what she was doing, unless, of course, she succeeded. But Michael would have been bemused and not surprised at all at his big sister, always trying to play catch-up." (Chapter 4, p. 95).

That evening Helen attempts to avoid the others. Everyone seems to know that she did not manage to take even one photograph. Helen is humiliated.

Helen meets up with Darrow and Jack. Helen is angry at Darrow for telling everyone she did not take any pictures. Jack says everyone knows because everyone is interested in seeing her fail. Jack and the other woman leave. Darrow and Helen have sex. The next morning Helen feels the need to escape. Darrow gives her a key to his room and says that the door is always open. Helen is filled with homesickness. While walking down the streets in Saigon Helen walks into a boutique. She meets Annick, a Frenchwoman that has lived in Vietnam for 15 years. Annick and Helen quickly become friends.

Helen worries about a relationship with Darrow. Helen is ambivalent when she doesn't hear from Darrow. Part of her is relieved and the other part is upset. When Darrow returns from being out in the field he and Helen speak. Darrow makes it clear that nothing will happen between him and Helen.

Helen's bags to remain packed in the middle of the hotel room. Helen realizes that she does not belong in Vietnam but cannot bring herself to leave. Returning home at that point would mean she had failed. Helen thinks about her childhood with Michael and her parents.



Helen decides that it is important to befriend other people in Saigon if she is going to survive.

"In her effort to prove that she could survive in Saigon and function without Darrow's help, she befriended other journalists in town, went to official briefings, took the rickety blue-and-white Renault taxis out to Tan Son Nhut to photograph American and Vietnamese soldiers from operations. She and Robert joined official Army junkets that flew journalists out and transport C-130s, waiting to take pictures of scarred land and dead soldiers hours after the action ended." (Chapter 5, p. 111).

Helen also thinks about the other journalists and how they compete and cooperate in the field.

"The journalists were in a questionable fraternity while out in the field, squabbling in arguing among themselves, each sensing the unease of the situation. No getting around the bullishness of pouncing on tragedy with hungry eyes, snatching it away, glorying in its taking even among the most sympathetic: 'I got an incredible shot of the dead soldier/woman/child. A real tearjerker.' Afterward, film shot, they sat on the returning plane with a kind of postcoital shame, turning away from each other." (Chapter 5, p. 111).

The relationship between Robert and Helen begins to fall apart.

Helen begins to tag along on military assignments to take pictures in two get a feel for the area.

Helen meets Frank MacCrae, a former Special Forces officer. MacCrae tells Helen that she has missed the best part of the war. Helen talks about her brother Michael. Helen learns the truth about Michael's death.

The reader learns about Helen's first trips in areas via helicopter and the first ride in a gunship. Like many reporters, photographers and journalists Helen becomes obsessed with her equipment, seeing her supplies as a form of protection.

Only a few weeks after Helen meets McRae, he has killed. Helen feels an extreme sense of grief over Frank's death.

Helen experiences her first Christmas in Vietnam. During dinner Darrow arrives and says that Jack has been killed.

Darrow comes to Helen's room in the middle of the night for comfort.

Helen manages to get permission to go out on ground search and clear missions with the military. The military is not pleased about the decision but they relent. Helen learns to behave like a drill sergeant, cussing out officers whenever they try to deny access. The soldiers begin to respect Helen. Others began to see her as being one of the boys.



Helen takes a picture of a private named Scanlon. The men discuss how Scanlon made a mistake and share war stories. Someone comments that the Vietnamese do not value life as Americans do.

"Helen heard that over and over. And, of course, after living through war for two generations, it seemed at some level to be true. Many of the Vietnamese seemed numb to the unrelenting death and destruction that was messing with these American boys' minds." (Chapter 6, p. 132).

Helen's experiences in the jungle are recounted including the search for food and water and the unbearable heat. There is an incident when Helen steps forward to take a picture of an old grandfather and is berated by a Captain who claims she is going to get them killed.

Back in Saigon Helen begins to learn about the darkroom operation courtesy of Arnie, the wire's office manager.

Helen begins to believe that she will be able to survive in Saigon and is amazed that she is able to do so considering her lack of training and preparation.

Linh arrives at Helen's hotel room with a note from Sam. Darrow has sent Linh to work with Helen claiming that he is an invaluable tool. Linh hopes that Helen is able to withstand a very long war.

One week after Linh had been introduced to Helen, he notices a picture of Helen on Darrow's table. Linh is surprised at the photograph. Linh feels betrayed and jealous because he did not know that Darrow had been on assignment with Helen. It was common to see American men with Vietnamese women but no one had ever seen Darrow with another woman. Linh points out that everyone gets lonely. After all he'd never spoken about Mai until she was dead.

Darrow worries about Helen and hopes that she does not make the same mistakes he has made by staying in Vietnam too long. There are worries that Helen will become obsessed with the war. Linh begins to work with Helen. This includes walking through Saigon so he might be able to see it through her eyes. Linh also teaches Helen how to speak some basic Vietnamese.

Helen first assignment for Gary is to cover the Buddhist strikes. This includes visiting pagodas around Saigon. Helen's job is to get pictures of the daily lives of people in the pagodas. Linh is not gentle with Helen and at times regrets not being gentler and kinder.

Linda makes his monthly meeting with Mr. Bao, supplying him with maps, Marlboros, and Wonder Bread.

Linh begins to detest working with Helen and prepares to give Darrow an ultimatum. Either Linh works alongside Darrow or he would work for no one. Linh feels like Helen is pushing him beyond his limits, asking him for more than he wants to give.



chapters 4-7 Analysis

Helen gets her first real taste of being out in the field. Darrow seems to have no choice but to take Helen under his wing. The reader gets the impression that the main reason Helen wanted to go to Vietnam was to follow in her brother Michael's footsteps:

"Michael. Determined to follow in their father's footsteps. To outdo him if possible. Graduated with honors. He could have done anything, but he wanted only to be in the elite corps. Because dad wasn't. Her father would have been dismissive of what she was doing, unless, of course, she succeeded. But Michael would have been bemused and not surprised at all at his big sister, always trying to play catch-up." (Chapter 4, p. 95).

Helen is told, none too gently, that she does not belong in Vietnam or in war time under any circumstances, and certainly not as a combat photographer. Helen is on the verge of fleeing the country many times but there is always something that makes her want to stay. For a while, that thing is Darrow. Helen and Darrow fall into an easy affair. Darrow, much older, is someone that Helen looks up to, someone that can train her. Darrow makes it clear that he is a married man and has no future with Helen. At first Helen is devastated but then realizes that perhaps it is best. Helen does not permit herself to miss Darrow while he is away.

Helen learns the ropes the hard way and begins to see her photos come alive through the lens. Her friendship with Annick comes at an opportune time, just when Helen begins to feel that if she is going to survive at all, she will need friends - people other than Darrow.

Helen does manage to make friends with other journalists, Americans, locals and others. It is important for Helen to have a sense of community even in the face of war and brutality. Darrow worries that Helen will lose herself as he has and is not sure how to protect her throughout the experience.

Linh is not happy about being assigned to Helen. Linh does not want to babysit the American woman and finds that women in general make things difficult. However, Darrow seems to know what he is doing. For now, Linh will do as Darrow asks.



chapters 8-11

chapters 8-11 Summary

Helen and Linh arrive in Xa, the village in which Darrow is recuperating. This is the third time Darrow's helicopter had gone down. Some wonder if his luck is going to run out. Linh wishes desperately that it was only Darrow and himself like it used to be. Having Helen in the mix changed everything. Darrow thanks Lin for taking care of Helen. Linh tells Darrow that he must be getting sloppy.

There are two men that work for USAID. They have agreed to take care of Darrow for the 4 weeks it will take for his arm to heal. Helen resents that Darrow never thinks to ask if she has anything else she needs to do. He simply expects her to stay with him. Linh excuses himself and says he will return at the end of the month.

Helen and Darrow stay in a shack. One of the USAID men offer something better for Helen but Darrow says that Helen has simple tastes.

After everyone leaves, Helen tells Darrow that Linh had stopped her from going on the convoy that had been destroyed. Helen berates herself for being so eager. Darrow says she should look at Linh as a guardian angel.

Helen stays by Darrow's side and begins to become involved in the village life. The war seems to fade away.

"At first Helen was relieved to be away from combat, but as time passed her thoughts returned to the soldiers she had met; what had happened to them; what it meant. The old curiosity gnawed, and she thought she wouldn't last, would need to make an excuse and rush back to Saigon. The seeming importance of events, and her desire to be there to record them. But with the passage of days, it grew difficult to remember the shape and taste of the fear that had enveloped her; she stopped believing in its power."
(Chapter 8, p. 172).

Helen learns about the tragedy surrounding Linh's family.

The morning after the summer festivities end, it is time to go back to Saigon. Linh returns. Helen says she has been dreading the day.

While Linh was away, he dreamed while staring at a picture of Helen. Now he berates himself for being foolish.

Linh's time away from Helen and Darrow is discussed. He visited his family's village. He also met with Mr. Bao. Linh also spent time telling stories to children about fairies.

Helen learns that the Vietnamese must be left to fend for themselves in their own way.



The crew takes some time to have fun. Linh confesses to Helen that he does not know how to swim. Helen teaches him. For the first time since Mai's death, Linh feels the touch and kindness of another. He knows he is in love with Helen. There is a great deal of fun to be had which offers some relief from the stress.

A group of refugees walks alongside the road. Tanner and others are also present. Tanner goes to take a photo of an emaciated young man pulling a cart filled with provisions, grandparents and children. Darrow loses his temper and a fight is barely avoided. Tanner says that Darrow is a lunatic. Darrow later tells Helen that he did not care about the people for a long time. Tanner crossed the line in Darrow's eyes by exploiting the people.

Darrow tells Helen about his will back in Saigon. It is not true that Darrow has a death wish; in fact he hopes to live to a ripe old age. He wants Helen to know that he does not want to be buried when he dies.

Helen is supposed to go out on patrol with Captain Olsen. Linh tells Helen he cannot go with her. Darrow wants Helen to stay behind. Helen refuses.

Helen's assignment is plagued with problems from the beginning. Helicopters are diverted or canceled and Helen's arrival is delayed. Helen learns that Captain Olsen has had a recurrence of malaria and has been evacuated. One of the other men tells Helen that Olsen's replacement is an idiot and she would be better off to come back when Olsen has returned.

Helen separates herself from Samuels and the other men. Captain Horner seems eager to take her on the mission. Helen is impressed by orders strict discipline on the men. Samuels and Horner continue to have conflict. Samuels is shot and killed

Helen returns to Saigon. Darrow and Linh are on assignment. Helen cannot explain why but is disturbed by Samuels's death. Helen cannot make sense of it. Gary picks up Helen's film. Helen is still in bed. The doctor diagnoses Helen with poststress and exhaustion. Helen tells the doctor to call it a vitamin deficiency. Gary asks why Helen does not live in a better place. Helen is ready to give up and go back to the States. Gary tries to talk her out of it.

Helen has dinner with Annick. Annick tells Helen that Darrow's wife has come for a surprise visit. Annick tells Helen that she should marry Robert. Annick says that women don't matter to men like Darrow. If Helen has already proved her point, then she should go home. Helen says those moments are why she is alive.

Helen and Darrow get in to an argument over the presence of his wife. Darrow says he is going to end his marriage and wants Helen to be there when he returns. Darrow never tells his wife.



chapters 8-11 Analysis

Helen gets her first real taste of being out in the field. Darrow seems to have no choice but to take Helen under his wing. The reader gets the impression that the main reason Helen wanted to go to Vietnam was to follow in her brother Michael's footsteps:

"Michael. Determined to follow in their father's footsteps. To outdo him if possible. Graduated with honors. He could have done anything, but he wanted only to be in the elite corps. Because dad wasn't. Her father would have been dismissive of what she was doing, unless, of course, she succeeded. But Michael would have been bemused and not surprised at all at his big sister, always trying to play catch-up." (Chapter 4, p. 95).

Helen is told, none too gently, that she does not belong in Vietnam or in war time under any circumstances, and certainly not as a combat photographer. Helen is on the verge of fleeing the country many times but there is always something that makes her want to stay. For a while, that thing is Darrow. Helen and Darrow fall into an easy affair. Darrow, much older, is someone that Helen looks up to, someone that can train her. Darrow makes it clear that he is a married man and has no future with Helen. At first Helen is devastated but then realizes that perhaps it is best. Helen does not permit herself to miss Darrow while he is away.

Helen learns the ropes the hard way and begins to see her photos come alive through the lens. Her friendship with Annick comes at an opportune time, just when Helen begins to feel that if she is going to survive at all, she will need friends - people other than Darrow.

Helen does manage to make friends with other journalists, Americans, locals and others. It is important for Helen to have a sense of community even in the face of war and brutality. Darrow worries that Helen will lose herself as he has and is not sure how to protect her throughout the experience.

Linh is not happy about being assigned to Helen. Linh does not want to babysit the American woman and finds that women in general make things difficult. However, Darrow seems to know what he is doing. For now, Linh will do as Darrow asks.

The relationship between Helen and Darrow is changing. What was once a casual affair seems to have taken on the guise of something more permanent although everyone knows that Darrow is married. The stay in Xa shows that Darrow wants Helen to be with him. However, when Darrow's wife arrives in Saigon, things change. Everyone expects Darrow to run to his wife. He tells Helen that he is leaving her. However, Darrow lies about that. Darrow sees his wife and never tells her that he wants a divorce.

By this time, Helen's relationship with Robert is nothing but a friendship. In fact, Robert has dated Annick for a short time.



chapters 12-16

chapters 12-16 Summary

Robert is promoted and sent to LA as a bureau chief. Helen meets Robert for a last lunch. She tries to ignore the fact that he had been dating Annick. Helen asks Robert how he can leave Vietnam. Robert warns Helen about becoming too involved and expresses concern about Darrow and the fact that he takes unnecessary chances.

Helen and Darrow visit a Red Cross camp for children. Darrow wants to take pictures of one of the children to encourage Americans to send money. Then they will follow the children through rehab and raise even more money to save dozens of kids. Helen worries about exploiting the child.

Thao is introduced. Thao is Linh's sister-in-law. Thao is jealous that she cannot get Linh's attention. In Thao's mind Linh should marry her. However, Linh seems to be lost to her. Thao believes that it is Helen's fault.

Thao invites Linh to have dinner. She wears a new outfit and tells Linh that the dinner is a way to thank him for all he has done for them.

Linh feels as if he will give into Thao's seduction. Then he thinks of Mai and sees it as a desecration of her memory.

The plan to return to the U.S. seems to be going farther away than coming closer together. Helen can see in Darrow that he is taking chances. Darrow and Tanner decide to let bygones be bygones.

Helen begins to fall apart and tells Darrow that she can't do it anymore. Darrow says that belief is the first thing to go and that she will be better off without it.

There is a going away party for Robert. He tells Helen that he has invited anyone he has ever met. Robert asks Helen to marry him. Helen laughs and says he would drop over dead if she accepted.

Helen and Annick spend time dancing together. Darrow and Tanner get into another fight. Later Darrow tells Helen that he hates the fact that he sees himself in Tanner. Darrow says he will leave with Helen although both suspect that it is untrue.

Darrow and Anderson go out on a flight together. The plane goes down.

Darrow is reported as MIA. Linh and Helen go along with 2 green berets. They find the crash site. Helen rushes ahead although everyone knows that it is much too late and nothing can be done. Linh berates Helen for acting like a child. Helen says that she just needs Linh to be her friend. One of the soldiers tells Helen that Darrow and Anderson died like heroes, trying to save two of their own.



Linh decides that the only way he can pay tribute to Darrow is to send Helen home. It had been Linh and Gary that told Helen about Darrow's plane.

Linh talks Helen into making the trip along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The trip is exactly what Helen needs to deal with Darrow's death. The plan worked. Helen found herself completely taken in by the surroundings. The culmination of the trip was the most memorable. Linh, Helen and the others are confronted by a boy soldier.

"Helen looked at him and knew it was probably the end for all of them, but something in his face and gestures made her unafraid. Gently she raised her hand and ran her index finger lightly across her neck, more a statement of the situation they all found themselves and then a threat, and the boy soldier exhaled without a sound, stepped back, his eyes traveling again to Linh, who raised his own hand to cover his face, palm down, slowly dragging his hands down his features, fingertips lightly grazing his chin, a mime to erase all that had been seen, and the boy soldier turned quickly at the new barked orders from the men soldiers industry, and again he looked at the River, squinting as the sun reflected off of it, motionless for a moment before he moved away, blowing a big, sugary bubble." (Chapter 13, p. 262).

Upon returning to Saigon Helen and Linh developed the photos they had taken on their trip. Helen notices that Gary's hair turned white in the months ahead and gone. Gary tells Helen if they do anything like that ever again that they are fired. Gary says he does not want to lose another photographer. Gary hires Linh as part of the full-time staff.

Helen plans to return to California. Linh says he may marry Mai's sister, Thao. It is the obligation of the Vietnamese to care for their family and Thao needs a father for her child.

Darrow's wife fought against the Vietnamese and the magazine and won the right to have Darrow's body returned to New York for burial. There is a procession. Helen looks for Annick but knows that Annick will not go to yet another funeral.

Helen leaves Saigon. It is too late when Linh asks for something to remember her by. The gold scarf Helen gives to Linh holds no scent.

Mr. Bao visits Linh at the apartment. Linh had lied to Helen about Thao. Linh had refused to marry Thao, so she set her sights on a mechanic that lived on the other side of the city.

"Helen refused to attend the memorial service for Darrow in New York City. She considered it a hijacking of his wishes and would not be party to it." (Chapter 14, p. 271).

Helen flies into San Francisco where she is met by her mother. A young girl protests in the airport. The protest seems foolish to Helen as the young girl has no idea what she is talking about. The girl asks Helen what it's all about. Helen thinks it is strange that no one has ever asked her that question before.



Everything at Helen's mother's house was exactly the same. Only Helen had changed. Returning home was harder than Helen had thought. Her mother threw parties and tried to get Helen to return to her old life. Helen avoided talking about Vietnam whenever possible. One of the neighbor's sons would not be dissuaded. Eventually, Helen tells stories.

Charlotte worries about Helen's state of mind.

"Sometimes Charlotte entered her room she thought empty only to find Helen there, staring off to space, her face broken apart, her daughter the Picasso woman. Helen sat on the couch, legs curled up, tears rolling down her face, and all the mother could do was take her child in her arms, rock back and forth for hours, pretend her daughter was still a child and could be seduced, nearly frightened of the dark." Chapter 14 page 276

Darrow's wife asked Helen to bring his belongings to New York. Helen could have sent them with Robert or someone else from the magazine but she held on to them. She wasn't ready to let go yet.

Linh sends a letter to Helen. The letter seems impersonal. In it, however, Helen learns that Linh knows her better than she realized. Helen will only be whole when she sees the burned grass on the hillsides replaced with living grasses.

Helen calls Tom and they have dinner with Charlotte. Afterward Tom and Helen walk on the beach. Tom asks when Helen is going to return to photography. Helen says she is going to find something else to do. A false start to a romantic interlude ends up badly with Helen throwing up from drinking Scotch.

Helen flies to New York. She meets Lilly, Darrow's wife. Helen learns a lot about Darrow. Neither woman was his first or only love. Lilly says that Darrow wanted a home, someone to survive for, which is why she had the house and their son, Sammy. Lilly says she hated Helen in Saigon but now she realizes that Helen lost more than she ever could.

Robert drives up to see Helen. He offers her a job, in part to follow up on the child brought from Vietnam. Robert wants Helen to track the girl's progress. Robert also talks about how he offered Linh a transfer and American citizenship. Linh refused. Robert tells Helen that Linh is not married. Robert says he would like to have a normal relationship with Helen if she is willing to try.

Helen visits the little girl, Lan, in the rehabilitation center. Lan tells Helen that there are no accidents. The girl's mother said she lost her leg because she was stupid. Darrow made his last trip because he wanted to die. The girl suffers from post-traumatic stress and shell shock. She goes into screaming fits.

Helen tells her mother that she must return to Vietnam. Charlotte argues but Helen will not be dissuaded.



Helen returns to Vietnam where she is met by Linh. It has only been months but seems like years since she has seen him. Already she has forgotten about the formality. Helen kisses Linh's cheek. Without Darrow, the easy friendship seems strained. Linh asks about Mai. Linh says she is married and they are expecting a child. Helen wants to sit up and talk at the hotel but Linh tells her to rest. They can talk later.

Linh and Helen go out on an assignment. Helen is injured. She is rushed to a field hospital where she is given a hysterectomy. It will take a month to heal. The doctors blame the medics and the medics blame the doctors. Linh visits every day. Each day, Linh brings a present for Helen.

Helen is finally recovered enough to sit up. One day she decides that she must have some pho - a hot soup. Helen goes to the stand on the street and collapses. Linh carries her home. The woman who runs the stand says she will bring soup every day so that Helen will not break her neck.

Helen returns to work. She sets out to find Lan. The trek is long and hard as the village had been burned. Lan is finally located. The girl no longer wears a prosthetic because she has outgrown it. She seems pleased that people bring her presents now. In Helen's eyes, the girl has not been saved.

Helen thinks about the Western Highlands and how it is still vital for the Vietnamese to name and lay claim to their land. In Vietnam, geography is power.

"Helen had her own geographies. She knew the land by its colors-in the Mekong always greens and golds and blues, lights soft, opaque from the water on the earth and in the air. Soldiers inevitably covered with dirt, the dirt of the delta heavily mixed with clay along the waterways so that it dried whitish on the faces and bodies are both living and the dead." (Chapter 16, p. 318).

Helen also thinks about the Central Highlands and other regions and what they mean to the people.

"Her geographies, too, are full of dangerous curves and valleys; she had to remain constantly in flight, never alighting in one place too long, never putting weight on the crust of the Earth that might give way." (Chapter 16, p. 318).

Helen and Linh go out on an assignment in Tan Nguyen. The soldiers were prepared to call fire upon themselves and use an escape plan to get out. Helen and Linh go to photograph the dangerous stunt. Both are terrified and barely make it out in one piece.

chapters 12-16 Analysis

Robert prepares to leave Saigon to return to California where he will work as a bureau chief. Everyone is happy to see him off at his "Light at the End of the Tunnel Party."



Darrow and Tanner have been at odds for some time. Darrow says it is because he sees Tanner in himself. Warring with Tanner is a way to war with himself in some ways. Darrow regrets losing some of his edge.

Helen collapses when she learns that Darrow is MIA. Everyone knows that MIA means dead. They simply have not found the body. It is Gary and Linh that break the news. Already Linh is taking care of Helen. The trek out to find the helicopter is not wise but it is something that Helen and Linh both feel is necessary.

Near death experiences bring Helen and Linh even closer together. After their last experience with the boy soldier, Helen decides that it is time to go back to California.

Returning to California is a strange experience. Helen is numb with grief - grief for Darrow, for herself, and for Vietnam. Although everything in California has stayed the same, Helen has changed beyond measure. Charlotte does not know what to do to help her daughter.

"Sometimes Charlotte entered her room she thought empty only to find Helen there, staring off to space, her face broken apart, her daughter the Picasso woman. Helen sat on the couch, legs curled up, tears rolling down her face, and all the mother could do was take her child in her arms, rock back and forth for hours, pretend her daughter was still a child and could be seduced, nearly frightened of the dark." (Chapter 14, p. 276).

Helen's visit to New York provides some closure and also acts as a form of self-flagellation. Meeting with Lilly seems like a peculiar thing to do, particularly since it almost seems as if Lilly is the other woman. The conversation between the women is difficult. It seems to bring a sense of peace to Lilly, who somehow knew that Darrow would never come home.

Helen receives letters from Linh that are in some ways impersonal and yet deeply personal. Helen becomes homesick for Vietnam.

Charlotte is terrified when Helen says she wants to return to Vietnam. Helen is insistent.

Helen begins to realize the meaning behind some of the things Darrow had said about caring too much. Helen becomes extremely disappointed over the failures with Lan, realizing that not everyone wants what we want for them. We cannot make someone want something that is foreign and perhaps against that person's nature.

Linh continues to feel protective of Helen and blames himself when she is injured out in the field. It is during the recuperation phase that Helen begins to understand the depth of Linh's love for her.

Helen does not wish to flee Vietnam again but feels that she does not need to go on some of the field expeditions that she might have chosen when first in the country.

Helen's independence rears its head again when she sneaks out of the apartment to get some pho. The grandmother promises to take care of Helen until she is well, which is yet another sign of community and of the acceptance of Helen into the neighborhood.



chapters 17-20

chapters 17-20 Summary

Linh thinks about how his heart has been locked away since Mai died. Helen has brought it back to life. While she is gone Linh thinks about her, plays with an earring. Linh does not show Helen these feelings. Linh believes that it was the touch of Helen that caused the love to return.

"One came to love another through repeated touch, he believed, the way a mother bonded with her newborn, the way his family had slept in the communal room, brushing against one another, a patterning through nerve endings, a laying of pulse against pulse, creating a rhythm of blood, and so now he touched others, strangers, only fleetingly, without hope."

Helen asks to return to the village where she stayed with Darrow. It has been burned. Helen argues that it had been peaceful. They also visit the village where Linh's aunt had lived. Linh and Helen tell stories in the night.

Linh and Helen marry. Linh moves into the crooked apartment in Cholon. Linh has a meeting with Mr. Bao in the woods. Bao has heard about Linh's marriage and wonders why Linh would make such a move. What is in it for Linh? Bao has a difficult time believing it is love. He wants Linh to get Helen to work for the other side.

Linh and Helen had decided not to tell anyone about their wedding. They told Gary because they felt he had a right to know. Gary is pleased and says that perhaps finally something true had come out of the war. He predicts that Linh and Helen will be happy. Despite the war and everything going on around them, Gary is right - Helen and Linh are happy.

Helen had slept outside the embassy before returning to the crooked apartment in Cholon. Helen decides that if the Communists are going to kill her, they can do so there. Helen is sad that so many people have deserted. All of her friendships have gone. She had always wondered how Linh had stayed aloof.

Helen stays, watches and photographs as the NVA invades Saigon. She watches as the Saigonese pledge their new allegiances.

Helen meets up with Gary and Tanner. Gary asks why Helen is still there and reminds her that she no longer has credentials with the service. Helen teases Gary with the photos she has taken. Although Helen and Tanner have never been friends, there is a camaraderie that exists for time served.

Tanner, Matt and Helen head out of the country with the rest of the foreign correspondents. Helen thinks about getting to Linh and then going home to spend some time in California. There would be other wars.



There is gunfire. Helen blacks out. She hears a whimper from Matt and nothing from Tanner. The whole scene is much like a dream sequence. Helen is alive.

Linh arrives at Camp Pendleton and meets Charlotte. Both are grief stricken. Instead of resting, Linh goes to see Robert. Robert agrees to send Linh to Cambodia to cover the take over of the Khmer Rouge. Linh follows his contacts and resources and continues to come up empty.

Mr. Bao had made sure that Linh did not officially exist. Any contact Linh might have made with NVA would be suspect. It would be a miracle to find out what had happened to Helen during the ambush.

He has lost hope.

Linh stands with the other members of the foreign press, waiting for news. At the last, he sees a battered and bruised Helen. Helen has come back from the dead.

chapters 17-20 Analysis

Linh's poetic side continues to come out as he tells stories and thinks of Helen. Linh would have been a playwright and poet had he not been sucked in by the war effort. Linh may still realize those dreams. It is clear that he has the tender feelings of a poet. The development of his love for Helen is best expressed in this passage:

"One came to love another through repeated touch, he believed, the way a mother bonded with her newborn, the way his family had slept in the communal room, brushing against one another, a patterning through nerve endings, a laying of pulse against pulse, creating a rhythm of blood, and so now he touched others, strangers, only fleetingly, without hope." (Chapter 17, p. 327).

Marriage seems unavoidable for Helen and Linh. While Helen wants only a simple civil ceremony, Linh insists on a Buddhist ceremony. They can have a civil ceremony in Saigon if Helen wishes but it is important to Linh to marry in a traditional way. Despite the times, Helen is equally traditional and is grateful that she never shares her apartment with another man.

The story returns to the fall of Saigon and the exit of Helen, Tanner, Matt, and other foreign correspondents. Soli adds in some mysticism. Someone gives Helen a Buddhist coin which she takes with her to Cambodia. When Helen's convoy is hit, it is unclear what has happened or how, who is injured or dead. It seems that clutching the coin in her mouth has somehow saved Helen and the others.

It is grief that brings Linh and Charlotte together. Helen is assumed dead but Linh knows in his heart that she is alive. Robert helps out once again by sending Linh on assignment in Cambodia. Linh will have a difficult time finding ways to get information but is prepared to turn over every stone to find Helen.



Linh encounters even more obstacles than he expected at the outset. Even at the last minute, when someone thinks he sees Helen, the vision is almost cast out because the number of people is incorrect.

It is almost miraculous how Helen reappears from the rubble and into the arms of Linh, her beloved.



Characters

Helen Adams

Helen Adams is the main character in Tatjana Soli's "The Lotus Eaters." Helen is a naïve girl that arrives in Vietnam from her home in California. Helen's interest in the war began with her father's experiences in Korea and then her brother's death while serving with the Marines. Helen decides that she wants to become a combat photographer and eventually lands a job with Life Magazine. Helen meets the experienced and worldly Sam Darrow, a Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist not known for his soft fuzzy side. Darrow takes Helen under his wing and teaches her the ins and outs of her new job.

Helen is excruciatingly naïve when she arrives in Vietnam. She thinks she loves Darrow almost immediately but then realizes that there are some relationships formed during war that are merely convenient or necessary for human survival.

Throughout the story, Helen wars with herself and others over her role in Vietnam and how her personal beliefs and idealism war with her surroundings.

Helen's relationship with Robert more or less dissolves as she loses her naivete. Helen's relationship with Linh is real but cannot overcome her addiction with war. When Helen leaves Linh on a helicopter to return to Saigon, he notes: "Over the years, he doubted her love, if that love could only exist in war, if she insisted on staying partly because their love was only possible in his own country. Now he knew that she did love him. Clear now that she was as dependent as any addict on the drug of war. He had underestimated the damage in her." (Chapter 1, p. 43).

Linh

Linh uses two names throughout the story. The first is Tran Bau Linh. After Linh deserts from the SVA, he changes his name to Nguyen Pran Linh. Linh is introduced in 1963. He is married with a child on the way. Linh is close to his family. He had no choice but to join the army although he could easily see himself as being a professor or living the life of an academician as literature and languages appeal to him. Linh's father is a professor in Hanoi. Linh had been sent away once and it was nearly two years before he could go home and see his wife of two months. This time, Linh was assigned to a new post and the morning after he left, his wife, their unborn child and the rest of the family was killed. Linh saw no reason to stay in the army. In fact, he saw no reason to live.

Linh had spent one day working with Sam Darrow before he defected. After leaving the SVA, Linh applied for a job at Life, using Darrow's name. Linh got the job. He and Darrow worked well together. After a short time of working together, Darrow and Linh meet on a terrace. Darrow says that when they met Linh's name was Tran Bau Linh. Linh says that that man is dead and now he is Nguyen Pran Linh. Darrow says he will keep the secret. Linh will learn to trust him.



Linh meets Helen through Darrow. Linh had no interest in women or anything else after Mai died. The night Linh picked Helen up off the street in Cholon changed everything. Linh works as a bridge between Helen and the Vietnamese, teaching her about the culture and helping her learn to survive in a foreign world.

Sam Darrow

Sam Darrow is a veteran photographer with Life Magazine. He becomes Linh's boss and Helen's mentor. Darrow is known for taking ricks and doing whatever needs to be done to get the photo. Darrow's death is a pivotal point in Helen's life.

Robert

Robert begins the story as Helen's boyfriend. Robert works at one of the wire services and attached himself to Helen the day she showed up looking for work. The two eventually drift apart, each with their own secrets.

Gary

Gary is the head of Life's office in Saigon. He controls the assignments and is also the person that hired Linh.

MacCrae

MacCrae was a member of the old guard. MacCrae left Helen a beaded sheath and the last photo ever taken on his camera.

Michael Adams

Michael Adams is Helen's brother that died in combat. Once in Vietnam, Helen finds out the truth about Michael's death.

SVA

The SVA is the South Vietnamese Army, one of the major fighting forces in the Vietnam war.

NVA

The NVA is the North Vietnamese Army, one of the major fighting forces in the Vietnam war.

U.S. Military

The American military is omnipresent throughout the story. Helen and the others work alongside the U.S. soldiers for protection and to get the best possible photos for the magazine.



Objects/Places

Saigon

The main setting used in "The Lotus Eaters" by Tatjana Soli is Saigon. Helen arrives in Saigon in the early days before the heavy fighting truly begins. The surroundings could not be more foreign. The heat is oppressive and the comforts of home in the U.S. have been removed. Everything is always covered with dust and mud. The streets are always crowded with bustling men, women and children, even in times of danger. However, as Annick points out to Helen early on, it is easy to tell Americans because they are always in a hurry and the Vietnamese tend to take things at a much slower pace.

Helen Lives in Saigon with Linh, her lover and fellow photographer. The building in which they live is relatively non-descript and certainly not luxurious by any means. It is not far from the United States Embassy, where Linh and Helen go to escape as Saigon is falling. People are killed on the street, including children. Helen is attacked because she holds a camera. Along the way, it is obvious that most people have deserted the city and looting has been the number one activity of its remaining citizens.

Vietnam

Vietnam is the main setting in Soli's "The Lotus Eaters." The story takes place during one of Vietnam's most turbulent eras - the Vietnam War. In Vietnam, the people referred to it as the American War so it would not be confused with the French War, both of which were designed to free Vietnam and are considered to be Wars for Independence.

The author includes a map in the book to help the reader with context and locations of various places mentioned in the story. Vietnam is located south and west of China. The country is bordered to the west by Laos and Cambodia. It is bordered to the east by the Gulf of Tonkin and the South China Sea.

The main city mentioned in North Vietnam is Hanoi. The northernmost city in South Vietnam is Quang Tci. Other cities mentioned in South Vietnam are numerous and include Saigon, Danang, Camau, Pleiku, and others.

The story covers a period of time before the Vietnam War was in full force, beginning in 1963. It ends after the fall of Saigon in 1975.

Soli manages to capture the horrors of war while also detailing a great deal about the country itself, including its people and customs.



Vietnam War

The Vietnam War is the main topic of the story and the reason why the freelancers are in Vietnam in order to capture the story of the war for the readers of Life Magazine.

Field

The field describes being out amongst the fighting and other regions outside the offices of Life. Journalists and photographers must go there to capture the story behind Vietnam.

U.S.

Helen, Darrow and many others come from the United States to document the war.

Life Magazine

Life Magazine was one of the preeminent magazines for many decades in the U.S. It was known for its reporting, and perhaps most of all, its breathtaking photography.

Photography

Photography is the life's work of Helen, Linh, and Darrow. It is the way each person captures and defines the war through its images.

New Orleans

New Orleans is Robert's home town. He often dreams of taking Helen away to New Orleans to show her off to his friends and family.

California

Helen is originally from Southern California. While in Vietnam, Helen often dreams of returning home to her mother's house and long walks on the beach.

Cholon

Cholon is the Chinese section of Saigon. It is where Linh found Helen lying on the street.



Themes

Vietnam

Vietnam is the main setting in Soli's "The Lotus Eaters." The story takes place during one of Vietnam's most turbulent eras - the Vietnam War. In Vietnam, the people referred to it as the American War so it would not be confused with the French War, both of which were designed to free Vietnam and are considered to be Wars for Independence.

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Soli manages to capture the horrors of war while also detailing a great deal about the country itself, including its people and customs.

Relationships

Relationships are at the core of the story. One of the most important relationships is between Helen and Linh. At first they started out as colleagues but then became lovers. By the end of the story, when Saigon falls, Linh and Helen see themselves as a married couple and even present themselves as such when trying to get out of the country. Linh worries about Helen and is distraught when she leaves him on the helicopter to go back to the war. Soli writes:

"Over the years, he doubted her love, if that love could only exist in war, if she insisted on staying partly because their love was only possible in his own country. Now he knew that she did love him. Clear now that she was as dependent as any addict on the drug of war. He had underestimated the damage in her." (Chapter 1 p. 43).

There is a good relationship between Linh and Darrow. The relationship, borne out of necessity, becomes a good working relationship and then a friendship with respect.

Darrow and Helen have an interesting relationship. It begins as mentor/student, turns romantic and needful before turning into friendship.



Another important relationship to Helen is her friendship with Annick, the French woman that runs the store in Saigon. Annick comes along just when Helen needs a female friend the most.

War

Vietnam is the main setting in Soli's "The Lotus Eaters." The story takes place during one of Vietnam's most turbulent eras - the Vietnam War. In Vietnam, the people referred to it as the American War so it would not be confused with the French War, both of which were designed to free Vietnam and are considered to be Wars for Independence.

The Vietnam War is one of the most controversial in American history as many of the people in the U.S. feel that the American military should not have been involved in the battle between North and South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese were supported by communist allies while the South was supported by the United States and other anti-communist forces. The war lasted for two decades. In the story, the majority of the characters involved in the war became involved in the mid-1960s and saw it through until the end in 1975 when Saigon fell. Some characters, such as Darrow, were killed during that time period.

As freelance photographers, Helen, Linh, Darrow and the others did whatever was necessary to capture photos that would express the horrors of war. The pictures were of anything that could be considered representative, despite the fact that most were gruesome. The photos included people being killed, destroyed villages, troops, and anything else that might intrigue and interest the readers of the magazines that purchased the photos.

Style

Point of View

The point of view used in "The Lotus Eaters" by Tatjana Soli is the third-person and omniscient. This point of view works well in the story as there are several components and underlying factors that would not be revealed otherwise. While the first person point of view might have been interesting when coming from the characters, particularly Helen Adams in her early days in Vietnam and various times of culture shock and confusion, the third person point of view conveys the entire story and not just the subjective opinions of the characters. It also permits the reader to take part in the journey and development of each character in the story. Understanding all of the characters, such as Linh and Darrow, helps to round out the story between the new and old characters and how their wartime experiences changed each in various ways.

The point of view used in the story allows the reader to grasp the depth of each character and his/her role in the story. For example, using a point of view of Adams only may help the reader to understand her plight as a new member of the Life team yet could not possibly reflect the point of view held by an objective source such as Gary or the seasoned mind of Darrow. Likewise, seeing the story from the mind of Linh would prove to be fascinating considering his history as a Vietnamese citizen yet it could not possibly reflect the opinions and experiences of MacCrae or Darrow.

Setting

The main setting used in "The Lotus Eaters" by Tatjana Soli is Saigon. Helen arrives in Saigon in the early days before the heavy fighting truly begins. The surroundings could not be more foreign. The heat is oppressive and the comforts of home in the U.S. have been removed. Everything is always covered with dust and mud. The streets are always crowded with bustling men, women and children, even in times of danger. However, as Annick points out to Helen early on, it is easy to tell Americans because they are always in a hurry and the Vietnamese tend to take things at a much slower pace.

Helen lives in Saigon with Linh, her lover and fellow photographer. The building in which they live is relatively nondescript and certainly not luxurious by any means. It is not far from the United States Embassy, where Linh and Helen go to escape as Saigon is falling. People are killed on the street, including children. Helen is attacked because she holds a camera. Along the way, it is obvious that most people have deserted the city and looting has been the number one activity of its remaining citizens.

There are many other locations mentioned throughout the story as Helen, Darrow, and Linh travel throughout the countryside to get the perfect photo for Life Magazine.



Language and Meaning

The language used in "The Lotus Eaters" by Tatjana Soli is a mix of American and Vietnamese. Two of the main characters in the story, Helen Adams and Sam Darrow, are American. The majority of people they interact with are also American. All are in Vietnam on some type of assignment - most are freelance reporters, journalists and/or photographers. Linh is the exception. Linh is a native of South Vietnam. However, Linh's father was a master of languages and stressed that his children learn how to speak English and French because it was the language of the masters.

Annick is also an important character. Annick is French but has lived in Vietnam for fifteen years. Annick speaks English, French and Vietnamese. Throughout the story Helen learns to speak Vietnamese as well.

The language used in the story is mostly American English with some Vietnamese interspersed. The Vietnamese language is typically used when describing a place or item such as a type of food or dwelling. The Americans, particularly those affiliated with the military, use a great deal of abbreviations, many of which are not explained.

Structure

"The Lotus Eaters" by Tatjana Soli is a work of fiction. The book is comprised of 386 pages, broken down into 20 chapters. The shortest chapter is 6 pages in length; the longest chapter is 42 pages in length; the average number of pages in each chapter is 19. Each chapter notes a certain time and/or place.

Chapter 1: The Fall - April 28, 1975

Chapter 2: Angkor- 1963

Chapter 3: A Splendid Little War - Saigon, November 1965

Chapter 4: Indian County

Chapter 5: Chieu Hoi, Open Arms

Chapter 6: Haa - To Civilize, Transform

Chapter 7: Hoi Chanh - Defectors

Chapter 8: Xa - Village

Chapter 9: Tiens - Fairies

Chapter 10: Thien Ha - Under Heaven

Chapter 11: Bao Chi - Journalist



Chapter 12: A Map of the Earth

Chapter 13: Ca Dao - Songs

Chapter 14: Back to the World

Chapter 15: Hang Hum Noc Ran - Tiger Den and Snake Venom - A Place of Danger

Chapter 16: Tan Nguyen - Western Highlands

Chapter 17: Nghia - Love

Chapter 18: Cat Cai Dau - Cut Off the Head

Chapter 19: Ocean of Milk

Chapter 20: Dong Thanh - One Heart

The story typically runs in chronological order with some use of flashback (e.g. Chapters 1-2) to fill in the back story. The main plot revolves around Helen's life in Vietnam and addiction to war. Subplots include friendships, patriotism, and love.



Quotes

"...we reached the country of the Lotus-eaters, a race that eat the flowery Lotus fruit....Now these natives had no intention of killing my comrades; what they did was to give them some Lotus to taste. Those who ate the honeyed fruit of the plant lost any wish to come back and bring us news. All they now wanted was to stay where they were with the Lotus-eaters, to browse on the Lotus, and to forget all thoughts of return..." (Homer, *The Odyssey*; Preface).

"The city teetered in a dream state." (Chapter 1, p. 1).

"They woke to the crumping sound of mortars on the edge of the city. She rose and was in motion, a prickling of adrenaline that she recognized when an operation was about to take place." (Chapter 1, p. 18).

"This was the way one lost one's homeland. The first things lost were the sights, then the smells. Touch disappeared, and, of course, taste was quick to follow. Even the sounds of one's own language, in a foreign place, evoked only nostalgia." (Chapter 2, p. 42).

"She could not face returning home a failure." (Chapter 5, p. 110).

"Her arsenal of supplies became her protection." (Chapter 5, p. 118).

"After months of pestering military command, she obtained permission to go out on ground search-and-clear missions." (Chapter 6, p. 126).

"In the morning her pictures and story headlined across a dozen front pages worldwide. Life magazine bought the series of photos and planned to use one as the cover for the following week; the contributor's notes touted her as the first woman combat photographer for the Vietnam war." (Chapter 6, p. 141).

"The wariness of the villagers grew to friendliness - Darrow and Helen enfolded within the life of the village." (Chapter 8, p. 176).

"Helen refused to attend the memorial service for Darrow in New York City. She considered it a hijacking of his wishes and would not be party to it." (Chapter 14, p. 271).

"It was a prodigal's return." (Chapter 15, p. 295).

"The war changed, and she was changed with it." (Chapter 16, p. 316).

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the meeting between Darrow and Linh. What skill did Linh use to impress Darrow? Why did Darrow expose the film before shooting Dung? Did Dung ever figure out what Darrow had done? How did Linh know about photography? What was Darrow's first impression of Linh?

Why do you think Helen left Linh on the helicopter to go back to Saigon? What does Linh mean when he says that Helen is addicted to war? Do you think Helen truly loves Linh?

MacCrae tells Helen that sometimes knowing the truth - no matter how horrible - is better than having things left to one's imagination. What was MacCrae speaking about? Was he right? What was Helen's opinion?

Discuss the relationship between Linh and Helen. How did they meet? What was the circumstance? When did their relationship turn personal? How did it affect each party? What might you have done in that same circumstance? Can a relationship formed under this circumstance survive?

Discuss the relationship between Darrow and Helen. How did they meet? What was the circumstance? When did their relationship turn personal? How did it affect each party? What might you have done in that same circumstance? Can a relationship formed under this circumstance survive?

Discuss the Vietnam War and the participation of the U.S. Do you think the U.S. should have been involved? Explain. How did the presence of the U.S. help and/or hinder the cause? Who won the war? When did it end? What is the current situation between North and South Vietnam?

Helen faces discrimination when she arrives in Vietnam. Why? How many other female photographers are working in that sector? Who helps Helen? Who gives Helen the hardest time and least amount of cooperation? How does Helen change the situation?