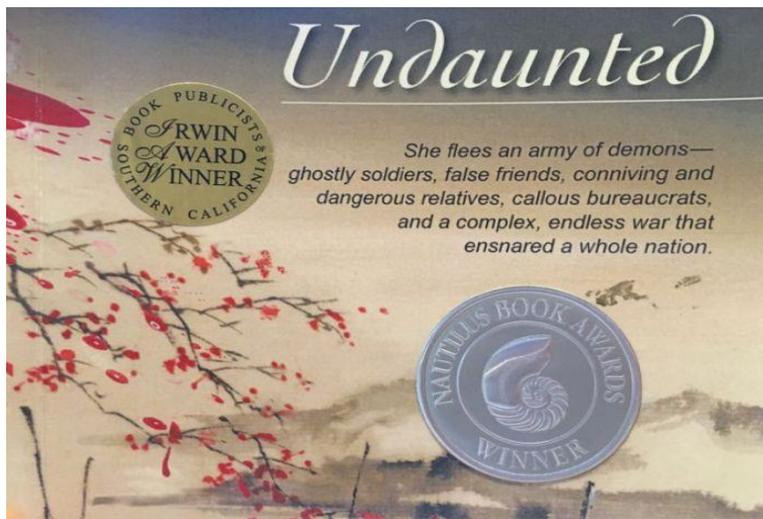


When there is no place to call home, home is where the heart is

Titi Mary Tran/Nguoi Viet English

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Undaunted, a book by Van B. Choat, won Nautilus award 2016-2017 (silver medal) and Irwin award from Book publicists of Southern California. (Photo: Titi Mary Tran)

Home is love, is emotion.

WESTMINSTER, California (NV) – Van B. Choat shared her memories of growing up an orphan in Vietnam in her 2016 book, “Undaunted: A Memoir.” It is the story of a child’s challenging journey to womanhood in the background of war, massacre, battlegrounds, death, physical and mental abuses, and above all, human love and strength.

Her book has given the Vietnamese American women of Generation X – those who are old enough to remember the way and young enough to have grown up as Americans – an avenue to speak out. Their voices are the voices not of elites but of the common people.

With her words still resonating a year after her book’s publication, Nguoi Viet sat down recently for an interview with Van B. Choat.

NV: Why did you write this memoir?

Choat: My children are half-American and half-Vietnamese, and they don’t know too much about Vietnamese culture and where I came from. Initially, the reason for this book was for them to know where I came from, how my life was in Vietnam, and [to know] my parents, their great grandparents. Then later on, all of my friends were saying, “Why are you so selfish? Why do you want to keep this book for yourself and your children? Why don’t you publish it?” So that’s when I decided to publish the book. Now my purpose – I would like to share my book with the world, to help those with difficulty in life. Maybe my book would help them with inspiration to move forward.



Van B. Choat and her husband at their marriage ceremony (1979) and at his military camp. (Photo courtesy: Van B. Choat)

NV: How did you feel after you finished writing the book? Was there a sense of relief?

Choat: Oh yes, absolutely. There is a sense of accomplishment, something greater than I could imagine. Something I wanted to do in my thirties and have never had a chance to do it. I felt a big relief.

NV: How do you remember all the details from the age of 4?

Choat: You know, when I was 4 years old, my first memory was getting on the bus, moving from Rach Gia to Sai Gon, and for some reason, I still remember that moment. It's like I took a snapshot in my mind, decided that was what I would want to remember and that's how I remembered throughout the years. It's like a movie going through my mind. And the movie keeps replaying years after years, including even the specific sentences and words people said.

NV: At 4 years old, you did not have the ability to write a journal, but the scenes you described in your book – the bombing, the battles, even dead bodies, images of soldiers fighting, of a woman cradling a dead baby running back and forth between the two groups of soldiers: the north and the south. How do you feel about these memories that keep replaying in your mind?

Choat: I think it's just something you remember and you won't forget, you know? That scene is still playing in my head. The bombing that night, and how we got out of the bunker in the next morning, how we got our mother out, how I was standing on top of a dead body, and how my brother taught me to jump off a dead body by counting, just like a game from 1 to 10, and running around the base to look for father and couldn't find father. Most of the folks from that battalion were killed. You could see dead bodies scattered all over on the ground at the army post. It is so vivid I don't know how I remember them, but I remember them.



Van (long hair in the middle) as a child with her siblings, Grandma and relatives in Vietnam. Aunt Que (back row from right) is the aunt who hung Van and her sister in her book.
(Photo courtesy: Van B. Choat)



The only picture Van has left of her father (back row, first from right. Van is right in front of him).
(Photo courtesy: Van B. Choat)NV: So how do you deal with these memories? How did you make sense of it at that young age?

Choat: You know when I was burying my mother, I didn't know what was going on. I thought it was a game or people burying a bundle. They wrapped my mother's body in a straw mat, and dug a hold by the river to bury her. It didn't register to me what death was; even my brother said to me, "Oh you don't know anything." But he was crying.

NV: You saw death, you smelled death, you touched death. So to you, what is the universal truth about death?

Choat: It's part of life. You're born, then when you get older, you die and turn into dust. It's just like the revolving cycle of life. Am I afraid of death? No. Fear of death? No. And I say that because, if you remember in the book it talked about how I stood on a dead body and my brother talked me into jumping off the dead body, at that moment when I turned around and realized I did it. I was most afraid when I realized I was standing on top of a dead body.

But when I jumped off, there was no more fear. It was just like fear itself had gone. I was not afraid anymore. Once you make up your mind that you can do something, you can do it. That moment was what made me a really strong person. From that point on, it's just part of life. If something bad happened to you and you decided you're not going to let it bother you, you should move on, then you move on.

NV: What is your identity?

Choat: From Rach Gia to Sai Gon was the happiest moment of my childhood. The sadness did not register in me until I realized my mother was gone forever, around 6 or 7 years old. School kids made fun of me by saying that I was an orphan and that I was stupid and would end up nowhere. That's when I decided to study well in school and become somebody, just to prove to them I am not dumb and stupid. Even at that young age, I was determined I was going to be somebody. It didn't bother me to be an orphan. I just miss my parents. I wished my parents would still be alive and take care of me. I just accepted the fact that I was an orphan and I had to deal with it.



Van and her children next to her late husband's tombstone. Picture was taken in October 1987, 10 months after her husband, Ronnie Choat, was buried. (Photo courtesy: Van B. Choat)

NV: Who are you now?

Choat: I'm just a person, just like anyone else. I don't see myself as an orphan girl any more, but still in my heart there is some sadness when I see people have parents and have a place to go home and visit parents. And have family gatherings. I never had that. I never had a place to go home.

NV: So where is home?

Choat: Home is where the heart is. Home is where all the loved ones are with you.



Van B. Choat at Nguoi Viet Daily News. (Photo: Titi Mary Tran)

For more information about Van B. Choat, visit her website at vanchoat.com. **(Titi Mary Tran)**