

[ HARDCOVER: US ]

## 'The Boat' marks the debut of a major writer

The publication of Nam Le's first collection of short stories has made the Vietnamese-Australian author a literary sensation

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

*The Boat*, the first book of Vietnamese-born Nam Le, has taken the English-speaking literary world by storm, certainly in Australia and the US. The author left Vietnam when very young and eventually arrived in Australia. He subsequently began work as a lawyer but gave that up to enroll in creative-writing courses in the US. He now divides his time between these two countries.

The book consists of seven short stories (itself unusual for a first publication) and each of them is entirely different — in setting, style, and the point of view of the narrator or principal character. Only the first and last stories, both immensely strong, feature Vietnam, though neither has it as its principal location. Others are set in Colombia, Iran, Japan, Australia and the US.

Every story is a tour de force of imaginative sympathy and thoughtfulness. The one set in Japan, for example, is entirely phrased in the words of a small girl in Hiroshima in the days before the unleashing of the atomic bomb — she talks with gentle innocence of butterflies, flowers, the revered emperor, the war effort, and the lack of danger posed by single American aircraft — they only drop leaflets that it's forbidden to read, she muses as she plays in the dust.

The Colombia story is set in the drug capital of Medellín and is narrated by a teenager with orders from his gangland boss to kill his best friend. Grenades, pistols and machine guns are part of his everyday life, but by an extraordinary effort of empathy he's presented by the author as the adolescent he is, and with an adolescent's attitudes and loyalties, but forced into a terrifyingly adult predicament.

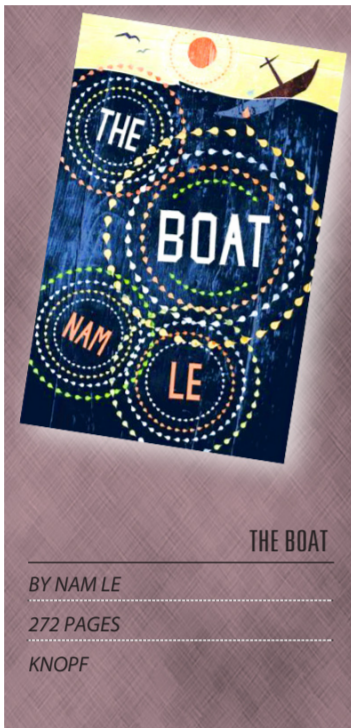
The story set in Teheran features an American woman who's visiting an Iranian friend she got to know in the US. She labors under multiple levels of incomprehension, and yet Iranian society is displayed in extraordinary detail — the food, the furnishings, the views from the city, the religious and other customs. I found it the least satisfying of the stories because I didn't understand why it ended as it did, but even so overall this is a quite exceptional book.

Nam Le is something of an intellectual writer — his vocabulary is extensive and even occasionally abstruse, and one of his greater strengths is giving characters the ability to look deep into themselves and ponder on why they're thinking as they are. But there's nothing whatsoever pale or abstract about these stories, none of Colm Toibin's willingness to leave stories without a traditional ending or of Kazuo Ishiguro's trademark understatement. Instead, violence is everywhere in this book, sometimes on the surface but, if not, then just beneath it.

The opening and closing stories featuring recent Vietnamese history are terrifying. In the first a student of Vietnamese extraction is studying on a creative-writing course in Iowa (exactly as Nam Le did — and this ability to be quasi-autobiographical in one story, and then write about a country he's never even been to in another, is part of his enviable strength as a writer). His father is visiting Iowa, and he's made to be a survivor of the My Lai massacre. This enables Nam Le to juxtapose young American GIs there — one in a bead necklace and baseball cap who taps his grandfather on the top of his head with his rifle butt, then twirls round and slides his bayonet into his throat — with his contemporaries at Iowa, making jokes about his "ethnic" stories and how much money he can make from them.

The last item features 200 Vietnamese emigrants in the 1980s on a fishing boat built for a crew of 15. Horror is piled on horror — storms, excrement, suicides,

### Publication Notes



THE BOAT  
BY NAM LE  
272 PAGES  
KNOPF

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disease, broken-down engines, no drinking water (let alone food) and sharks. Yet curiously there's nothing intrinsically sensational about Nam Le's writing. These things happened, and they're part of our world, he implies, as are seagulls with their stomachs torn out by fishermen's hooks, child soldiers, and raped and then executed children.

In place of sensationalism, Nam Le looks inside his characters. His refugees, for instance, aren't simply anonymous figures but lonely and jealous husbands, women with secrets, individuals with war-torn minds who set out together on a leaky wooden ship into mountainous seas, with worse to follow.

Nevertheless, this book doesn't really have any political axe to grind. Instead, Nam Le is saying, "Just look! These victims, from all over the world and often very young, were all partway through their real and only lives, yet were subjected to laceration and death for reasons wholly beyond their control or comprehension. And this could be you, or me, and one day it may be."

But even that is too specific. Each of these seven stories is different, but they do share the results of thinking unflinchingly on the harsh conditions of human existence. There are some discernible themes — difficult relations between parent and child is one of them, present in four of the seven stories. But there's also the serious writer's technical desire to create things that are coherent in themselves, but are also distinct from anything that he's imagined and written before.

That this book is the debut of a major writer is unquestionable. It isn't only that Nam Le often writes with immense power. He's also uncompromising (and hence occasionally difficult to follow), in deadly earnest, and writes about the age-old concerns of the greatest artists — love, death, fear, hope, and the profoundest human dilemmas.

When asked in an interview what the strongest fiction was that he'd read that year, Nam Le replied "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." Coming from such an impeccable source, I for one won't need any stronger recommendation.

## SUNDAY PROFILE



German conductor Gunther Herbig will guest-conduct three concerts with the National Symphony Orchestra this month

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

## Herbig brings his poise to the NSO

Instrumentalists of the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) like working under the internationally renowned conductor Gunther Herbig for two reasons, I gather. One of them is that he has a natural authority on the podium that makes them give of their best. The other is that, when he stops the orchestra in rehearsals, he invariably puts his finger on what's wrong. The musicians understand this because as often as not they too know what the particular problem is in advance.

Herbig has recently been appointed the NSO's Artistic Advisor and Principal Guest Conductor until 2010, and is currently in Taiwan to conduct three concerts. The first of these takes place in Taipei's National Concert Hall this afternoon.

When I spoke to him earlier this week I began by asking him where he spent his youth. Internet sites had disagreed, I found, one stating it was the former East Germany, the other the former Czechoslovakia.

"Both are correct in essence," Herbig replied. "I was actually born in what is now the Czech Republic. But we were Germans and my family later moved to East Germany where I was brought up."

Born in 1931, Maestro Herbig was able to move to the West in 1984. Was that difficult, I asked.

"We managed it because I had permission to conduct in Western

Europe and the US. But how to get our three children out was the problem. Eventually we managed it, but we were unbelievably lucky. Without the help of the US government I believe it never would have been possible."

He first visited Taiwan in 1991, he told me, with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. They played two concerts in the National Concert Hall. Then last year he was invited to conduct two programs with the NSO, and at around that time was asked if he would be interested in the post of Musical Director. Because of other commitments he found it impossible to accept, but agreed to the idea of advising on the whole NSO program and visiting three times a year to conduct. He'll be here again in December, and then in late spring 2009.

"So far virtually all I've seen of Taiwan is my hotel room and this concert hall," he said. "But I'm looking forward to getting to know Taiwan's incredible cultural heritage of Chinese art and culture during the times I'm here."

I asked what the NSO's strengths were.

"The orchestra has a very high standard," he said. "It possesses what I call a professional quality — a determination to be as good as possible."

Didn't that apply to all orchestras, I asked.

"No," replied Herbig. I couldn't help smiling, but thought it was better to leave it at that.

"The NSO has a young spirit," he continued. "They're enthusiastic, and they already have a wide repertoire."

They had a Composer in Residence, he added — David Chesky, the only American jazz composer ever to have been nominated for a Grammy Award in the Best Contemporary Classical Composition category. He should certainly widen the orchestra's horizons.

I next asked about musical life for classical musicians in the US and Europe.

"Standards are very high in the US," Herbig said. "Sponsorship accounts for around 40 to 45 percent of funding there, whereas in Europe government support is more usual. In the UK it's somewhere between the two, with support from the National Lottery and a little from government in the form of the Arts Council."

I asked him about classical music in Asia, and whether it interested the young.

"The young are likely to be more interested if one of their peers is appearing, for instance as a guest soloist. There are an incredible number of young pianists, violinists and cellists emerging at the moment

worldwide, often from Asian backgrounds. Japan used to be an important source, and now China is coming to the fore.

"It's true what's often said, that the future of classical music lies in East Asia. Interest here

is far higher than in the US. The level of instrumental training here in Taiwan is exceptionally high."

What plans did he have for opera, I asked.

"It hasn't been officially announced yet," Herbig said, "but let's say that one of the most popular operas ever written will be performed by the NSO next year. Yes, there was an idea for a production of Debussy's *Pelleas et Melisande*, but this has now been shelved. The music is wonderful, but there's almost no action, and that isn't much to the taste of modern audiences."

Maestro Herbig has his home in the Detroit and Lake Michigan area. I asked him how he liked it. Wasn't it rather industrial?

"Oh no. Detroit is the center for much of the American automobile industry — General Motors, Ford and Chrysler have their headquarters there. But that doesn't mean that their vehicles are all built there. They're built all over the world these days, including in China.

"We live practically in the woods. The climate is a central continental type. It's not unlike Taiwan's in the summer — hot and humid. In the winter it's very cold — a bit like Siberia."

Was the proximity of the automobile industry in Michigan good for sponsorship of local orchestras?

"When the economy is strong, yes. But at the moment, well, it's rather different."

When I asked Maestro Herbig what he did for recreation he looked rather surprised. Perhaps music was such an all-embracing passion it sufficed for both work and recreation, as it does with so many musicians. There was silence. Did he canoe on the lake perhaps, or play chess, I asked.

"Ah yes, I play chess," Herbig replied laconically. And again, I left it at that.

### PERFORMANCE NOTES:

Gunther Herbig will conduct two concerts with the NSO in Taipei, this afternoon and on Thursday evening, both in the National Concert Hall. This afternoon's concert features Wagner's *Prelude to Die Meistersinger*, Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor*, and Brahms' *Symphony No. 1*. The soloist in the Mozart concerto is the 28-year-old Russian pianist Alex Kobrin. Thursday's concert will contain Weber's overture *Oberon*, Sibelius's *Violin Concerto* and Schubert's *Symphony No. 9, "The Great."* Leticia Moreno will be the violin soloist. The concert in Kaohsiung on September 20 will repeat the *Meistersinger* Prelude and the Brahms *Symphony No. 1*, and add the two Beethoven *Romances for Violin and Orchestra*, and another by Pablo Sarasate for two violins and orchestra, played by the NSO's two concertmasters.

[ HARDCOVER: US ]

## Haunting words amid claims of 'victory'

'New York Times' reporter Dexter Filkins has risked life and limb to gather news in Iraq outside the Green Zone

BY LEE H. HAMILTON  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, WASHINGTON  
Numbers have defined milestones in the Iraq War. More than 4,000 American troops killed, 94,000 Iraqi civilians dead, 4.2 million Iraqis displaced, a US\$1 trillion price tag. Though these numbers are important, in *The Forever War*, Dexter Filkins — through gut-wrenching and touching vignettes — repeatedly illustrates their limits and reveals the human side of war.

Filkins' stories are those of a writer willing to endure hardship, danger and anguish to paint an accurate picture of war for the American public. In Iraq the pursuit of a story can cost a journalist his or her life, a fate Filkins, a reporter for the *New York Times*, and others have tempted each day outside the Green Zone in Baghdad. As I read this book, I could not help but contrast his courageous, at times even foolhardy, journalism with the reportage by those restricted to the Green Zone or spoon-fed information by the Defense Department's powerful public relations machine. No doubt such commentators take some risks, but Filkins' experience is of an entirely different magnitude.

His prose is as blunt as it is powerful. Iraqis, and Afghans, have spoken for themselves, and Filkins has listened carefully. He observes that in the Green

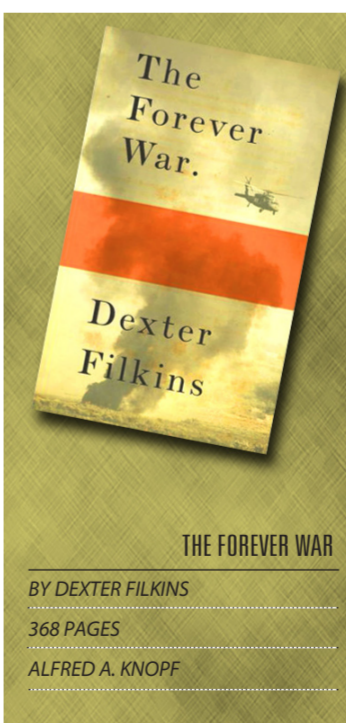
Zone it is not just blast walls and checkpoints that bind trailers, buildings and personnel together. There is also a continuing conversation, detailing the ebbs and flows of the insurgency, American progress, the stability of the Iraqi government and the readiness of Iraqi Security Forces.

And beyond the Green Zone there is another conversation, he writes, the Iraqi conversation, the one that really matters: "a parallel reality, which sometimes unfolded right next to the Americans, even right in front of them. And we almost never saw it." This conversation is Filkins' focus.

Recalling Iraq before civil war engulfs it, he writes of the lies Americans told themselves: "They believed them because it was convenient — and because not to believe them was too horrifying to think about."

The near-complete American failure to understand Iraq is still evident five and a half years into the war. I have seen firsthand the dearth of Arabic speakers in the US embassy. Still, the concrete implications of cultural ignorance pack a subtle, yet powerful punch. Filkins describes the Tigris River Park, a US\$1.5 million American project in Baghdad. An effort of misplaced good will, the new park deprived Iraqis of several favored soccer fields in favor of a "curvy, S-shaped sidewalk." It is a small incident — no explosions

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THE FOREVER WAR  
BY DEXTER FILKINS  
368 PAGES  
ALFRED A. KNOPF

or casualties — but it speaks volumes.

This is not, however, a book about finger pointing. Nor is it about policy failures or prescriptions. The author portrays and sympathizes with the men and women facing impossible challenges in Iraq.

A pamphlet discovered in Ramadi in May 2005 lists 105 insurgent groups that have claimed responsibility for attacks.

American soldiers must greet Iraqis at times with smiles and at other times with the barrel of a gun, perhaps without knowing which is appropriate until it is too late.

A lieutenant colonel grapples with balancing what he was trained to do — fight — and what he has been ordered to do: rebuild. "Sometimes, I wish there were more people who knew more about nation-building," the colonel admits in a stinging indictment of our institutional preparedness for the Iraq war and for nation-building in general.

Later, a pair of soldiers under his command go to prison for pushing two Iraqis into the Tigris River, one of whom drowned. Another American who refused orders to join them later reflects on his tour in Iraq, saying that "the gray area in the middle" is where the grimmer business of war occurs. That dissenter is serving a two-year prison sentence for robbing a Comfort Inn in Ohio after leaving the military.

Filkins wonders, as too few Americans have, about "not only what the Americans were doing to Iraq, but what Iraq was doing to the Americans." As more brave men and women return home and face formidable challenges adjusting to civilian life, this is a question all Americans are duty bound to consider.

This book is also deeply and

brutally personal. In Fallujah, the author and a photographer head to a bombed-out minaret to photograph a dead insurgent. Two Marines precede them to secure the minaret, and one, Lance Corp. William L. Miller, 22, of Pearland, Texas, is shot dead. Filkins tries to make sense of it: "Your photographer needed a corpse for the newspaper, so you and a bunch of Marines went out to get one. Then suddenly it's there, the warm liquid on your face, the death you've always avoided, smiling back at you like it knew all along. Your fault." Another Marine attempts to console him, saying, "That's what happens in war."

As for the situation today, Filkins describes early signs of the Sunni awakening. An Iraq insurgent, Abu Marwa, kills two Syrian members of al-Qaeda in Iraq to avenge the murder of his uncle. He delivers their blood in vials to his widowed aunt. "She drank the blood of the Syrians," Abu Marwa says. "You see. We were for revenge. She was filled with rage." These are haunting words amid claims of "victory" in Iraq.

They recall Filkins' sketch of Kabul in 1998, where, at a public execution, he hears over loudspeakers: "In revenge there is life."

This maxim is as foreign to American ears as the concept of a forever war.