



# Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam

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# **From Reader Review Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam for online ebook**

## **Aaron says**

This book was slow to grow on me; Pham's style of writing seemed choppy at first - it jumped points in time quickly, without much in the way of description. But, as you get into the book, and, of course, when he gets to Vietnam, the story really comes to life. This may simply be because of my own time spent in Vietnam a couple of years ago. His sparse descriptions of life in Saigon and Hanoi evoked my own memories of time spent in those cities. In the end, I came to enjoy his quick descriptions and choppy sentences; I don't necessarily think with correct grammar either, and this is a book about a man and his bicycle.

About halfway through, I started asking myself what the mandala was. Where is it? Why isn't it mentioned at all in the book? My basic understanding of a mandala was that of a visual representation of the universe and life itself. It's circular and vast, building upon its own inner layers. As I thought about this, I realized that more than anything else, his bike represented the mandala. The wheels brought him full-circle - from America to Vietnam. The journey allowed him to relieve all of the guilt and shame that came with his particular life story: the difficulty adjusting to life in America, coping with being a first son that doesn't live up to expectations, and the suicide of his sister. The constant spinning of his tires brings all these up to the surface and back down again - joy and grief, pleasure and pain, shame and pride. Each one surfaces again and again, and, in the end, he can finally come to terms with the good and bad of every action and decision that led him back to Vietnam.

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## **Connie says**

Vietnamese-American Andrew Pham writes about his search for cultural identity in a book that is both a memoir and a biking travelogue. He remembers the fall of Saigon, his father's imprisonment in a communist reeducation camp, and the family's escape from Vietnam in a leaky fishing boat when he was a ten-year-old. After a stay in an Indonesian refugee camp, the family came to the United States and eventually settled in California. Although he recognizes the sacrifices made by his parents, he also recounts how the Pham children were subjected to his father's temper and beatings. The suicide of his transgendered sibling was the impetus for Andrew Pham's journey of self-discovery.

The author quit his job as an aerospace engineer, and traveled by bike up the Pacific Coast, through Japan, and up the length of Vietnam. He visited important places in his family's history and found them completely changed. While he had some enjoyable times, he also saw terrible poverty and extreme corruption. Dysentery was an unwelcome companion over part of the trip. He weaves together two story lines--about his family and about his bike trip.

He was called "Viet-kieu" (foreign Vietnamese) in Vietnam, a slur by people who envy his success. In America, he also feels like an outsider. He experiences survivor guilt, explores his roots, and feels the pull of two cultures. He still seems to be searching at the book's end--and maybe it will be a lifelong search--for who he is. Laced with adventure and humor, this was an engaging story that held my interest.

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### **Lars Guthrie says**

Vietnam seems to be calling me recently. The graphic novel of "Artemis Fowl" startles me with its opening depiction of the central market in Saigon. A student researches Nixon's presidency and the fall of Saigon. I read "Tree of Smoke," and go to the internet to pull up maps, pictures and stories of Saigon, its surroundings, and the larger Mekong delta region, to look at the places I saw so many years ago (1969-1970). I am drawn into this work, on a summer reading list for another student. Pham seamlessly interweaves who he is today (bravely exposing his flaws), his homeland as he tours it, mostly by bike, and his family's troubled history and extraordinary escape as boat people, with insight and humor. While recommending the book to another Vietnamese expatriate, the father of one my students, he tells me about his own amazing journey to America, just as harrowing and dramatic as that of Pham's. And he lends me a DVD of the excellent and moving movie about the boat people, "Journey from the Fall." Read the book; see the movie.

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### **Autumn says**

I read this many years ago, around the time it first came out. From what I remember the language is beautiful. It is heartfelt and touching, yet somehow still remaining distant. I feel this is the point. After all, no matter how close humans get to figuring our own lives and humanity out, we never receive full disclosure, do we?

Sometimes I wonder if I went overseas to the places of my ancestors would I feel more at home? Would I find some lost part of my self that I left there? Would I make more sense to myself?

This type of personal searching and eloquent language (some thought provoking lines and beautiful descriptions) are what I remember from reading it long, long ago.

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### **Nhu Than says**

Andrew X. Pham's *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam* tells the story of Andrew Pham, a young Vietnamese-American man who travels to his hometown in search of "finding himself" due to a conflict between his adoptive land and his native land. The book is based on a memoir that uses flashbacks during the war, when Pham's family were imprisoned in Vietnam. However, escaping from Vietnam by boat, the family was able to start a new life in America. In search of Pham's identity, he sets out on a bicycle voyage, facing obstacles and experiencing a sense of adventure, Pham tries to discover himself by comparing the American culture to the Vietnamese culture. Pham explores the grounds of Vietnam despite the guilt of his sister's death, Chi who took her own life. The book examines the similarities of culture and family, which intertwines with the search for cultural identity.

A particularly memorable scene is early in the book when Pham tells a story of a starting family, Thong and Anh who lives in a shack in a back alley of a fishing town in Phan Thiet, Vietnam, struggling to support their first new-born baby. With no money to afford medicine, a doctor, or clothes to keep their baby warm, their little girl became too sick and eventually died during the night, not even a year old yet.

Ultimately, the story of Pham's adventure in Vietnam helped him discover his true cultural identity, bicycling from one city to another, being overcharged for being a Viet-Kieu, and reminiscing about his family's past. It all adds up to a tale of discovering one's self, a reality check for all that makes us realize who we really are. *Catfish and Mandala* tells the story very uniquely, reminding us to stay true to yourself, an insight of never forgetting where you've come from.

During the course of my reading, not only was I able to enjoy the adventurous trip, but I was also able to spice up my geography skills, learning about the different cities, the history and the aftermath of the Vietnam War. As a Vietnamese-American myself, it's shameful to say that I had no idea a city like Phan Thiet existed in Vietnam until I read this book. Following along the book, I had the chance to pick up the Vietnamese language as well as new vocabulary that I didn't know beforehand.

From chapter to chapter, the bicycling expedition had me reflecting on myself. *Catfish and Mandala* had me question about my own true identity of whether or not I had lost my Vietnamese roots. To have the fortunate opportunity to live the "American Dream," adapting to the English language was essential which made me forget my native language. Because of this book, it got me thinking of traveling solo to Vietnam in the future to regain my cultural identity, just like how Pham did.

I would definitely recommend this book because I believe it showcases a lot of emotional flashbacks and realistic events that everyone can relate to, especially from one Vietnamese-American to the next. Pham shares his bicycling trip to Vietnam to show his readers the country he grew up in, a place not only where he was born in, but where he came to visit to find his Vietnamese roots. The book gives the reader a sensational, imaginative ride to travel alongside with the author as each chapter is read, which, in my opinion, is something not many books can give to a reader.

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### **Sophia says**

I loved this book! Found it in a hotel in Hanoi, it was the perfect book to read as I returned home and reflected on our trip. Pham captures the rawness, beauty, chaos, and striving that characterized my brief visit better than I ever could. His own story is remarkable: escaped Vietnam with his family after the war, boat nearly sank, refugee in America, growing up in a rough neighborhood, family drama and trauma, and of course his journeys peddling through Mexico, the Pacific coast of the US, and finally, Vietnam. His writing was beautiful and I felt, deeply, his story of such a necessary journey.

Some descriptions I like:

"I try to explain to her about life in America. And that I don't know her. I try not to let my disappointment show. I come searching for truths, hoping for redeeming grace, a touch of gentility. But, no. The abrasiveness of Saigon has stripped away my protective layers. I am raw and bare and I ask myself, Who are these strangers? These Vietnamese, these wanting-wanting-wanting-wanting people. The bitter bile of finding a world I don't remember colors my disconsolate reconciliation between my Saigon of Old and their muddy-grubby Saigon of Now. Saigon gnaws at me . . . its noise . . . its uncompromising want . . . its constant . . . Memememememememememememe . . . "

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"Could I tell Calvin I was initiated into the American heaven during my first week Stateside by eight black kids who pulverized me in the restroom, calling me Viet Cong? . . . Although we often pretend to be modest and humble as we preen our successful immigrant stories, we rarely admit even to ourselves the circumstances and the cost of our being here. We elude it all like a petty theft committed ages ago. When convenient, we take it as restitution for what happened to Vietnam."

In the end, Pham realizes just how "home" America really is-- imperfections and all. I've been happy to feel similarly when returning from my travels, as much as I love being away.

"But now, I miss the white, the black, the red, the brown faces of America. I miss their varied shapes, their tumultuous diversity, their idealistic search for racial equality, their bumbling but wonderful pioneering spirit. I miss English words in my ears, miss the way the language rolled off my tongue so naturally. I miss its poetry. Somewhere along the way, my search for roots became my search for home-- a place I know best even though there are those who would have me believe otherwise."

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### **Sara Mannheimer says**

This book created a clear image of post-war Vietnam, but while I enjoyed following Pham's travels, I never became truly engaged with the book. Although the author constantly reiterated his deep and troubling ambivalence about his native land, his struggle failed to grab my heart. The book contained some scenes that were theoretically poignant and wrenching, but I just didn't think Pham's writing was strong enough to break through the screen of journalistic observation and actually convey authentic emotion.

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### **Emma Sea says**

2.5 stars

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### **Betsy McTiernan says**

I found this memoir last week while browsing in a used bookstore. I'm ashamed to say this was my first book about the Vietnam War from the perspective of a Vietnamese. Pham's is the story of a refugee's return to Vietnam in the early 1990s, shortly after the country became open to tourists. Pham, as a young man in his

20s, takes a bike trip around the country hoping to gain insight into his past and to gain perspective on what he has come to view as the dysfunction that is his family. From the first, he is dismayed at the poverty he witnesses and resentful of the people, many of whom treat him as a rich traitor--a Viet-kieu-- who deserves to be fleeced like any rich tourist. In exquisite, often grueling detail, he weaves these travel stories with his memories--of his childhood years in Saigon, of his family's escape, and of refugee life in California. Slowly, buried in the daily grind of surviving on the road, emerges the story of the particular tragedy of the Pham family. Awarded the Pacific Rim Book Prize of 1999, Pham's memoir is among the best I have read, both for its courageous honesty and engaging prose.

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### **Kit says**

Catfish and Mandala is a lovely book. I read it slowly so it wouldn't end. From the first page, I was engrossed in the story of one man's attempt to make sense of his past and his present by integrating the two parts with a return trip to Vietnam, twenty years after his family fled. A gifted storyteller, Pham describes unflinchingly the details of his childhood in Vietnam, family life in a traditional Vietnamese family, the struggles of being an immigrant in southern California and the poverty and corruption and sweetness of modern Vietnam. Reading this account while traveling through Vietnam as a first-time visitor, it feels like Pham got it just right. He describes his adventures as a viet-kieu (expatriated Vietnamese) with the voice of an insider looking at it from the outside - and the result is very compelling. I was happy to find it among the collection of badly photocopied books available from a Hanoi street vendor...

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### **James says**

This book is an exploration of the delusional idea that if we can just get away to someplace exotic, we will discover our true selves and make sense of our lives. Andrew Pham travels to Vietnam (which he and his family escaped around the time of the Vietnam War) tours the country by bicycle, and leaves with an upset stomach and absolutely no understanding of the Vietnamese people. In fact, I would go so far as to say that he hates them.

This fact wouldn't sway my feelings about the book one way or the other. The thing that really kills me is the prose, which is often heavy on nonsensical metaphor. Example: silence is "the gift into which one can cast all one's sorrow like trash into an abyss." All I can picture is an empty Cheetos bag being drawn into a wormhole.

The other thing I really hate is that Pham is very willing to air everyone's dirty laundry -- from the suicide of his transgender sibling to his palpable irritation at the impoverished Vietnamese who are constantly trying to part him from his money -- but never allows himself to be examined in the same way. No fewer than three times, Pham describes encounters with prostitutes (who are almost certainly underage indentured servants) and suddenly becomes coy, pulling the scenes up short and never quite owning up to his own exploitative behavior.

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### **Danny Schiff says**

While leading a summer community service trip throughout Vietnam, this felt like the perfect companion

memoir for the long flights and bus rides throughout the country. I expected this book to be a bit more about his bicycle adventure throughout Vietnam, which only sort of ebbed and flowed as the main theme. But Pham dealt with his personal and family cultural identity in this book, as he does not quite feel wholly American nor Vietnamese.

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### **Nikki Fordey says**

This was a moving and engaging memoir. Mr. Pham is very skilled at vivid description and is careful not to over-sentimentalize the often deeply personal subject matter. He is honest about his family and about his own feelings in a way that is highly admirable. His quest to explore his own identity is something that many people can relate to. Although his situation is rather specific, the book deals with themes that are fairly universal. I would strongly recommend this title to anyone that enjoys being entertained while having your own judgments logically challenged.

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### **Dana Stabenow says**

We have a lot of work to do on race in America. I'm exhausted just thinking about it, but as a white-as-you-can-get-without-bleach American I have to at least show up to read books like these. Because Americans of color and other ethnicities have to live through the brutality of it every day of their lives.

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### **David says**

History is a nightmare from which Andrew X. Pham is trying to awake.

I have a variety of odd and vague unappealing habits. One of them is reading one-star reviews on Goodreads. In the case of this book, one review of this book reads, in its entirety, “Just because you go on a cool vacation doesn't mean you have to write a book about it.”

Call me all hyper-sensitive, but that seems just a smidge unfair. I mean, as a child, the guy endures the danger and chaos of the lurching end of a war, his father is imprisoned and nearly killed, the family endures a nerve-wracking illegal journey out of the country in an open boat, followed by a prolonged period in a refugee camp where fellow inmates try to force his siblings into prostitution. Things get a little better when they get to the US, but they still have the isolation, the insincere “conversion” to Christianity (ironically, also a sincere attempt to make their American sponsors happy), the decision to travel across the country for the pleasure of living in a ghetto of fellow-exiles, plus the inevitable cross-cultural misunderstandings – deliberate and otherwise. I mean, all of that would tend to make one's return to one's home country more than “a cool vacation” – more like an attempt to find some peace in a world that hasn't given much peace voluntarily.

At times, this book reminded me of the genre (which I tend to associate with the British) I've heard called “comedy of embarrassment”, in which the hero is fairly, perhaps endearingly, dorky. This is not everybody's idea of a fun read. For example, the author, in spite of both a background as well as a family situation rife with unpleasantness, could reasonably be expected to know that, when you land at Narita airport in Toyko in the middle of the night, deciding to take the bicycle that you've just taken out of baggage claim and ride it

right out of the terminal unto the highway is not a life-choice that is likely to yield a pleasant result. In fact, the temptation to rhetorically ask your ereader if this guy had the sense that God gave dirt is well-nigh irresistible.

Still, there's a part of human experience and human history which cannot be summed up in histories and memoirs of the great and powerful, and this book does a good job going into it. The story is really more than a cool vacation – it's an attempt to come to terms with a particularly difficult past. People who can't understand that lives like AX Pham's are more difficult than their own should probably try to acquire some of empathy by getting out more or, if not fond of interacting with the world, reading books with greater empathy.

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