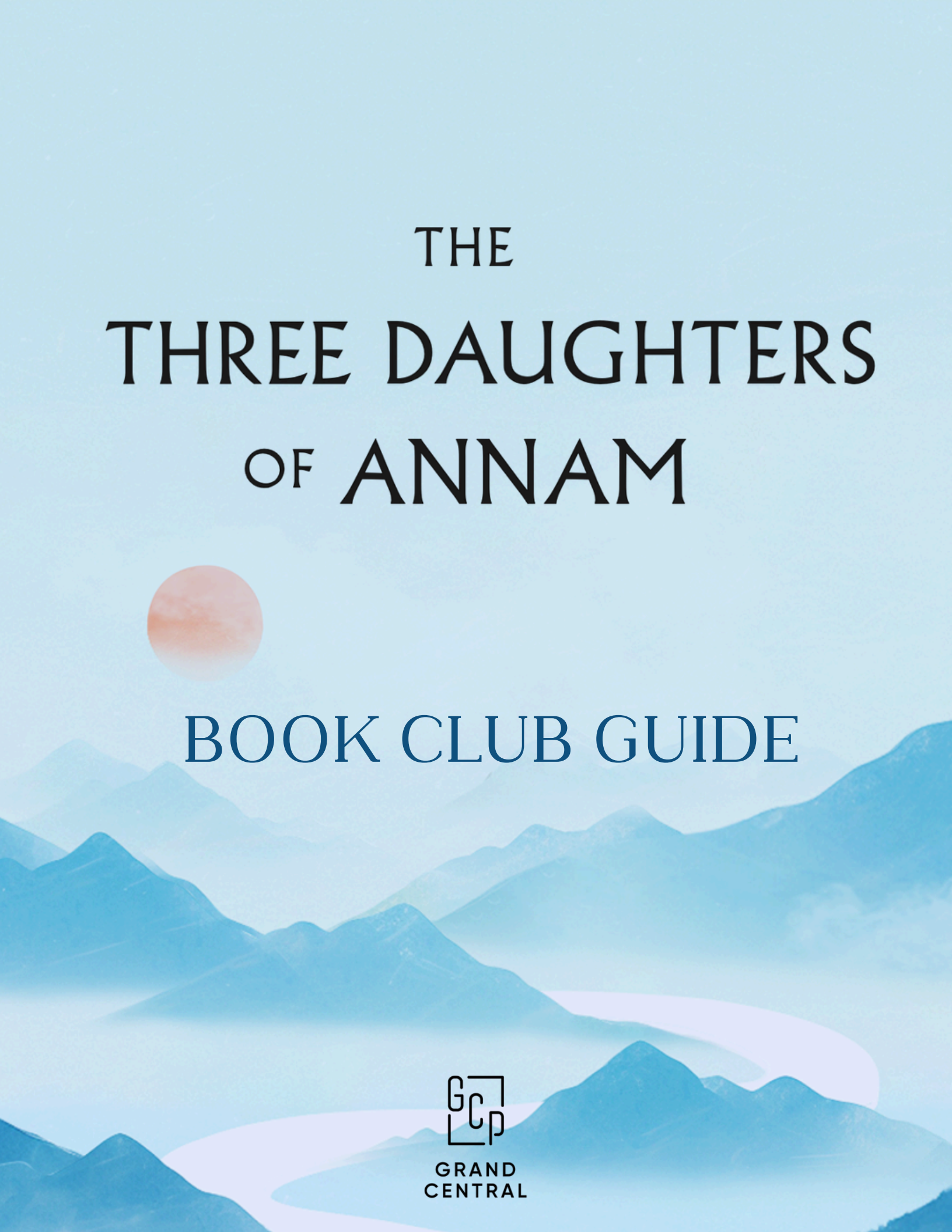
THE THREE DAUGHTERS OF ANNAM

BOOK CLUB GUIDE



GRAND CENTRAL

Dear Reader,

It is fitting that I draft this account of how I came to write *The Three Daughters of Annam* in the form of a letter. It is a hand-written letter, after all, that inspired the creation of this book and which comprises the centerpiece of its contents.

In 1947 my grandmother was shot and killed during a French air assault. She was carrying my one-year-old uncle, who was killed by the same bullet that passed through both mother and son. My father, who was three years old at the time, witnessed the death of his mother and it formed one of his earliest memories. For my grandfather's part, the tragedy of his wife's violent death threw him into a deep and prolonged despair, and to try to recover some semblance of peace, he composed a twenty-page letter in French (he was an eloquent speaker and writer of French, despite it not being his native tongue) addressed to my father, called "Le livre de mon fils," which his father-in-law then translated into Vietnamese and kept in the family archives for when my father grew older. Ultimately the letter did not reach its intended recipient until 1982, thirty-five years after it was written and ten years after its author died.

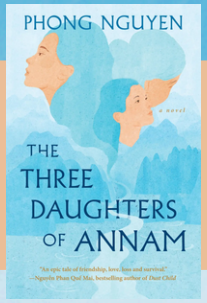
I encountered "Le livre de mon fils" in 1997, when I was nineteen years old, and have always wanted to write about it. My mother was going through a stack of old papers in her office and she handed me a paper clip–bound sheaf of paper in faded Courier font and said, "You might be interested in this." There was no solemn passing-on of family legacy. There was not even an explanation of the context. Moments later, I was seated on the faux leather couch in the suburbs of New Jersey, while a part of me was off dying in the countryside in Việt Nam fifty years earlier. It was not just the tragedy the letter evoked, but how it held such explanatory power for why my family was the way it was. Even at our happiest moments, there had always been an undercurrent of pain, and my father was particularly consumed by an aura of grief. If I could not share his silence, now I could at least understand it.

I knew that my grandmother had died in an air assault, but the only reason I knew was because I'd had to fill out a family medical history form the year before, and it required information about how my grandparents died. But I had assumed it was during a bombing. Something about the bullet from the pilot's strafing of the field that passed through mother and child felt terribly intimate. And I had assumed it was in a city, not in the countryside where they had retreated specifically to avoid the harms of war.

We still have a photo album of my grandparents, and in nearly every photo of my grandmother she is shown alongside her two best friends. When I finally came to write about my grandmother, I became obsessed by the fact that, though she married, she and her friends were still inseparable. The story I wanted to tell in *The Three Daughters of Annam* is not a traditional family epic, but the rippling effect of such a tragedy upon the community as a whole, and the people our lives touch even though they may not be bound by blood. The scope of this book spans three generations on three continents, and although the character who is based on my grandmother dies early on, she is present throughout the entire novel.

Phong Nguyen

On sale
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the novel explore female friendship during a period of significant historical and social transformation in Việt Nam? Discuss how Nhung, Mai, and Anh's relationship transcends the challenges of colonial occupation.
2. The novel portrays multiple generations of Vietnamese families. How do the characters in different generations—from the original trio to their children and grandchildren—navigate personal agency and societal expectationsdifferently?
3. Colonialism is a central theme in the novel. How do the characters resist or adapt to colonial structures through their personal choices and relationships?
4. Displacement is prominent throughout the narrative. How do characters like Vinh, Mai, and Elena experience cultural identity and belonging when living outside Việt Nam?
5. The novel explores complex parent-child relationships. Compare and contrast the dynamics between characters like Mai and Elena, Anh and her children, or Hào and Vinh.
6. How does the novel represent the impact of historical events—such as the Franco-Vietnamese War, the Việt Nam War, colonial occupation, and political transitions—on individual family experiences?
7. The novel spans multiple decades and continents. How does the author use these shifts in time and place to create a rich, interconnected narrative about Vietnamese identity and resilience?
8. How do economic pressures and class differences affect the relationships and decisions of the main characters? And then how do those differences cascade down to the generations that follow?
9. How does grief manifest differently for various characters (such as Hào, Anh, Vinh, or Elena)? What does the novel suggest about the process of mourning and remembrance?
10. If you could ask any character a question about their choices or experiences, who would you choose and what would you ask?

Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

Q: What first inspired you to write *The Three Daughters of Annam*, and how did you come to focus on the intertwined lives of Nhung, Mai, and Anh?

A: When I was nineteen years old, in 1997, I read the letter my grandfather wrote to my father, titled “Le Livre de Mon Fils.” That letter is quoted directly in this book, and it details the French air strike that killed my grandmother and it talks extensively about who she was and why she mattered. The discovery of this letter’s existence was one of the most profound moments of my life, and I have always wanted to write about the journey of the letter. I decided to focus on the intertwined lives of three friends when I noticed that in nearly every photograph of my grandmother, she was pictured with the same two friends. They seemed inseparable, and thinking about the bond they shared echoed what my grandfather had written about her and how she mattered to so many people.

Q: The novel weaves together personal stories with major historical events in Việt Nam and beyond. What was your research process like, and were there any surprising discoveries along the way?

A: First and foremost, my research involved sixteen hours of Zoom interviews with my father, during which we spoke about family history and the history of Việt Nam—not as an abstraction but as a lived reality. I also traveled to Việt Nam and spoke with relatives who remained in the country. As much as possible, I wanted to accumulate and convey a sense of Việt Nam as a place rather than as a war or as some kind of metaphor for a quagmire, as it is too often treated in the United States. In order to do that, it was important to engage with people rather than texts alone.

Q: *The Three Daughters of Annam* spans multiple generations and continents. How did you approach structuring such a complex, multilayered narrative?

Of the six books I’ve written so far, this is the only book that I’ve written out of sequence. Although it is presented chronologically, the composition of the book involved a lot of unpredictability. Each day that I sat down to write, I didn’t know what era and region I would be writing in until I began. I knew that the process of compiling it out of these quilt-like pieces would involve leaving out more than I kept in, and I wrote maybe three times as many pages as are in the final version. As one might imagine, this involved ruminating on narrative problems long before and after the writing was done. I also needed to know the characters and their historical contexts with intimate detail, so that I could enter their lives at any juncture and write about them on a given day. Very late in the process, I wrote an outline and found that I had to fill in scenes that were missing, but by and large the shape was constructed like a crazy quilt.

Q: Which character was the most challenging for you to write, and why?

A: Vinh was the most challenging character to write because he is based on my father. You would think that that would make it easier, since I know my father already, but in fact it was the opposite. When I first began writing this book, I imagined it would be a work of nonfiction, and the burden of depicting someone I love in a way that showed their flaws and failings was heavy. The reason that this book turned into a novel is that I needed to remove it from reality in order to feel like I could depict my father on the page.

Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR (Cont.)

Q: What do you hope readers will take away about Vietnamese history and identity after reading your novel?
A: I don't write explicitly with the intention of educating readers about Vietnamese history and identity because I did not grow up there and do not feel as though I have the authority to define for others what Vietnameseness is. There are as many ways to be Vietnamese as there are to be human. But as a Vietnamese American who was born shortly after the American War in Việt Nam and grew up in a time when Việt Nam carried a lot of connotations for many people, I have a point of view that I do want to impart. "Việt Nam" is not a synonym for a war, or a metaphor for an inextricable situation. When we talk about Việt Nam, we are talking about a country and a people with a rich and noble history and culture. Maybe because the American War in Việt Nam was the first heavily documented war, and there are so many iconic photographs and images from it, people falsely believe that they already know it and understand it. But there are real and complex individuals depicted within those photographs with lives that are just as varied and interesting as yours. And Việt Nam does not exist only in relation to its history with the United States.

Q: How do you balance historical accuracy with creative invention when writing historical fiction?
A: Sometimes, as with the writing of my previous book *Bronze Drum*, those two things are at odds. The ancient history explored in that book is populated with characters whose concerns and prerogatives are so fundamentally different from modern people, and I had to constantly confront what was known through historical record and what was celebrated in myth. But with *The Three Daughters of Annam*, historical accuracy and creative invention were harmonious. The historical details were generative and inspiring rather than inhibiting. Learning the history helped me tell a better story.

Q: What advice would you give to aspiring writers interested in telling multigenerational or diaspora stories?
A: I am consistently surprised at the sheer variety of ways to be human. There is no truth so fundamental that you cannot find someone who sees it differently. Honoring that, while at the same time honoring your own vision, can be a challenge. Anh is deeply religious; Nhung is science-minded; Mai lives for experiences rather than ideas. None of these describe my own sensibility, which is more observational. I advise writers who hope to capture characters in different eras and milieus to keep in mind the unknowability of others who are not you and seek to know them anyway.

Q: The last novel you wrote, *Bronze Drum*, tells the ancient true story of the Trung sisters. What was different writing this novel? What was the same?
A: Between the writing of *Bronze Drum* and the writing of *The Three Daughters of Annam*, everything was different. I wrote *Bronze Drum* in the order it appears on the page, based on ancient history, at a local coffee shop, consistently every morning. I wrote *The Three Daughters of Annam* out of sequence, based on family history, at home, at times scattered throughout the day. They both wound up taking roughly three years to write, but for completely different reasons. For *Bronze Drum*, whenever I went back to the research I had to reckon with the history and the cultural legacy of the Trung sisters. For *The Three Daughters of Annam*, I had to reckon instead with a deeply personal story and write it in such a way that it would matter to more than just me and my family.