TERRY GROSS, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. My guest is the winner of this year's Pulitzer Prize for fiction, Viet Thanh Nguyen. His novel, "The Sympathizer," is set during and just after the war in Vietnam and is told in the form of a forced confession written by a spy for the North Vietnamese who worked undercover as an aid to a South Vietnamese general. It appears that part of his crime is sympathizing with the suffering on both sides. That sympathy is in part a function of his own divided self. The character's mother grew up in the north of Vietnam.

His father was a French colonialist in Vietnam. My guest tells part of his own story in an essay at the back of the book. Viet Thanh Nguyen's parents grew up in the north of Vietnam when the country was divided in the mid-1950s. With the North under communist control, his parents fled to the South. When the South fell to the North in 1975, the family fled to America. Viet Nguyen was 4 years old at the time. He is now a professor of English and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California.

Viet Thanh Nguyen, welcome to FRESH AIR. Why did you want to write this novel from the point of view of a spy?

VIET THANH NGUYEN: Well, when my agent told me I should write a novel, the first thing that came to me was a spy novel and partly it was because it's a genre that I really enjoy and I wanted to write a novel that was actually entertaining, that people would actually want to read because I knew that I would also be dealing with a lot of very serious political and literary matters. And then the other inspiration for that was that there really were spies in South Vietnam that rose to the very highest ranks of the South Vietnamese bureaucracy and military.

And there was a very famous spy named Pham Xuan An who was so important that during his time as a mole he was promoted to a major general by the North Vietnamese. And he was friends with people like David Halberstam and all the important American journalists. And they had no idea that he was a communist spy who had studied in the United States. So all these factors were in my mind.

GROSS: The war in Vietnam was central to your whole family's story. Your parents are from the north of Vietnam and fled to the South in the mid-50s when the country was divided. They were teenagers then. Why did they choose to leave North Vietnam and flee to the South?

NGUYEN: Well, they were part of a great migration of about 800,000 North Vietnamese Catholics who had been persuaded by their parish priests that the communists were going to massacre them or at the very least persecute them. And that idea had been promulgated by the CIA, by Col. Edward Lansdale who became famous for helping the Philippines suppress a communist insurgency in the 1950s and then he brought his

talents to South Vietnam. And he became the inspiration - so it was rumored - for Alden Pyle in Graham Greene's "The Quiet American." So that was the history behind why my parents had decided to flee. And they came from a region in North Vietnam that was famous for producing hard-core revolutionaries like Ho Chi Minh, who was born 30 minutes from their home village. And it was a region famous for producing hard-core Catholics, and so my parents were among the hard-core Catholics.

GROSS: Did - your parents were teenagers when they left North Vietnam for the South. Did their families come with them?

NGUYEN: Well, my mother's family did go, so all my aunts on that side of the family and my grandparents on that side of the family went. My father's parents and his siblings decided to stay in North Vietnam. And the human consequences of this were that my parents left in 1954 to go south. My parents would not return to a unified Vietnam until the early 1990s, which meant my father didn't see his own relatives for 40 years. My mom, because her family came to the South and then, you know, she left in 1975 when Saigon fell, she wouldn't see her siblings again for 20 years.

GROSS: So your father's family who stayed behind in the North, were they persecuted like they were told by the priests that they would be?

NGUYEN: Well, they weren't subjected to pogroms or anything like that, but they certainly lived a marginalized life. You know, Catholics who stayed in the North were subject to suspicion because the communist regime, which was a really hardline regime, was very paranoid about any kind of subversion and they thought the Catholics would be a kind of subversive anti-communist force, and so that meant that their economic opportunities were really circumscribed. And so when I went back to visit in around 2004, all of my uncles were still living in the same compound that my grandfather had built and they, you know, had been sustained for a couple of decades in the 1970s and '80s, early '90s by the money that my parents had sent home as remittances. So I think they definitely did feel that - even if they weren't murdered - that they were definitely discriminated against by the communist regime.

GROSS: So in 1975, when Saigon fell, and your parent's town had already been taken over by the North Vietnamese, your family fled. So it was you, your parents and your brother?

NGUYEN: Yeah, I mean, the story was that in March, 1975, my father had gone to Saigon on business and my mother was at home in Buon Ma Thuot with myself, my brother and my adopted sister, who was the oldest sibling. So March, 1975, the Communist Army invades, seizes the town, cuts off all communication. My mother can't communicate with my father, so she takes our lives into her hands and decides to flee the town on foot with my brother, who was 10 years old, and myself, who was 4, and leaves behind my adopted sister, who was about 16, to take care of the family property because she believed - and reasonably so - that we would be back because that's the way the war had happened for the last 10 or 15 years - you know. So you saw battles and people would leave and they'd get to go back.

Well, of course we never got to go back. And my mom walked downhill to Nha Trang, that port town of about 150 miles south. And the best I can say about that is that at least it was all downhill and that I don't remember any of it even though my brother does and says it was horrible. And the historical accounts that I have read indicate that it was chaos and death and lots of civilians and Southern Vietnamese soldiers dead along the way. We caught a boat from Nha Trang to Saigon, met up with my father, fortunately enough.

And then a month later, the communists came and took Saigon. And according to my brother, you know, we tried various ways to get out of the city - went to the airport, couldn't get out. Finally, we made it onto - we found a barge, but we got separated. And so again my father was somewhere else. My mother was with us. And without knowing where my father was, my mother decided to get on that boat. And then later we discovered my father gotten on that boat, too. So my parents have always been risk-takers. And for us, most of the time, it's worked out.

GROSS: Most people form their earliest memories at around, I think, the age of 4 - 3 or 4. So, like, your earliest memories have to do with the war and with trying to escape and with being separated from your father. How do you think that affected your view of the world or your just, like, your basic identity?

NGUYEN: Well, I have vague images of pre-April 1975 Saigon, which are not reliable. You know, for example, I thought I remembered that when we were on that boat leaving Saigon, that sailors were shooting at smaller fishing boats that were trying to come up to us. And my brother said, no, that never happened. But then I read somewhere else that it did happen. But my most reliable memory really begins after we had come to the United States and we - all Vietnamese refugees, in order to come to the United States, were settled in these refugee camps.

And ours was Fort Indiantown Gap, Pa. And in order to leave one of these camps, you had to have sponsors take you. No sponsor would take my family of four. So my brother went to one family, my parents went to one family and at 4 years old, I was sent to live with a white family. And that's when my memory begins and - of being separated from my parents. And even though that was only for a few months, it was really traumatic for me.

And it's taken me a long time to understand how deeply traumatic that was, that that experience remains an invisible brand stamped between my shoulder blades. And in many ways, I've been - I spent a lifetime trying to make sense of what that trauma has meant to me.

GROSS: Did the family who was - did the family you were staying with take good care of you?

NGUYEN: I think I stayed with two families, if I remember right. And I think the first family was in a mobile home. They were young. They had no idea what to do with me. And now being the father of a 3-year-old, I can just imagine what kind of a terror I was

at 4 years old separated from my parents in a strange household. So then I was sent to another family with children. And they did take very good care of me. I remember them, you know, with fondness. But I also remember that, you know, they tried to make me comfortable.

And one of the ways that they did that was to give me a pair of chopsticks. And they all had chopsticks. And they said, show us how to use chopsticks. At 4 years old, I had no idea how to use chopsticks. And I felt very badly about that. And that was, I think, my first initiation into the sense of being culturally and racially different than other Americans.

GROSS: What happened to your 16-year-old adopted sister who was left behind?

NGUYEN: Well, you know, she had to take care of the house, take care of the family business. And when the Communists were already there, I mean, basically what they did was they seized the property, kicked her out. And then she was forced to join a volunteer youth brigade. And they were called volunteers - obviously they weren't - and sent to, you know, rebuild the country. So eventually, she came back from that. She found a husband, got married, had kids.

When I went back to Vietnam in 2004, for the second time, I finally was able to meet her. And she'd been a presence in my life because I remember, you know, we had a photograph of her when she was probably 16 - black-and-white photograph. And she was beautiful. And when I was growing up, I was always haunted by that face, her face, and thinking, why is she there and not here? I have no memory of her, but her memory obviously persists in the family.

And that sense of loss and of haunting had always stayed with me. And I also knew that, you know, she had been one of the people that my parents had been sending money to for decades to help keep her alive. And my own family, my parents are very, very strict, very hard-working, very upright. And then I went to Vietnam, and I met her. And she was beautiful, and she was wearing fashionable clothes.

And she had makeup on, and her hair was well done. And she laughed and smiled a lot. And I was really happy to find someone in my family who knew how to have fun.

GROSS: (Laughter) That's funny, actually, that the sister who gets left behind at the end of the war, you know, facing who knows what kind of doom, she's the one who knows how to have a good time.

NGUYEN: Yeah, well, I think that's one of the reasons why my parents think she's adopted and my brother and I are not because my brother and I are not good at having fun.

GROSS: (Laughter) So let's take a short break here, and then we'll talk some more. If you're just joining us, my guest is Viet Thanh Nguyen. And his novel, "The

Sympathizer," won this year's Pulitzer Prize for fiction. We'll be right back. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. My guest is Viet Thanh Nguyen. His novel, "The Sympathizer," won this year's Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It's written in the form of a forced confession by a spy from North Vietnam. The novel is about the end of the war from the points of view of Vietnamese characters. Viet Thanh Nguyen fled Vietnam with his family in 1975 after the fall of Saigon. He was 4 when they came to the United States. So after - what? - about three years or so, your family moved from Pennsylvania to San Jose. And why was there a big Vietnamese community there?

NGUYEN: Well, there is a big Vietnamese community in San Jose because the weather was good, because one of the refugee camps for Vietnamese resettlement was in Camp Pendleton in San Diego. So there was a significant population of Vietnamese people who were in California. And they migrated to different cities.

And what happened was - through their personal connections, they started to send the signal out that California was a good place to live. The weather was nice. The economy was good. There were excellent welfare benefits. And Vietnamese people who had been scattered all over the country by deliberate government policy in order to encourage assimilation - many of them heard that message and came to California and to other places like it, such as Texas. And that's how we ended up - that was one of the reasons why we ended up in San Jose.

The personal connection was that when we fled Buon Ma Thuot, the person that we had fled with was a very good friend of my mother's - a single woman who was an excellent businesswoman. She made it to San Jose. She opened possibly the first Vietnamese grocery store there. And she told my mom, you know, that they definitely needed to come to San Jose to just have a better economic opportunity. And that's why we went. And we went there. We worked for this family friend in her grocery store. And within a few months or maybe a year, we - my parents opened their own Vietnamese grocery store not far away.

GROSS: What are some of the things your parents sold in the Vietnamese grocery that you couldn't get in a supermarket?

NGUYEN: Well, rice. I remember that we had just - my dad had built these racks and racks that were just stocked full of rice up into the rafters. And I remember going there after school and hiding up in these rafters amid these sacks of rice and all kind of, you know, Vietnamese fruits and things like fish sauce - nuoc mam, which is the lifeblood of Vietnamese cuisine. And there was always a certain kind of odor in the Vietnamese grocery store that I came to recognize, which was the scent of rice and fruit and spices that you cannot find anywhere else - a certain kind of mustiness, which I assume might have been alien to Americans but to Vietnamese people was the smell of comfort.

GROSS: Your family fled South Vietnam to avoid the violence or persecution. You write the violence they sought to escape caught up with them because once they - after they opened up their Vietnamese grocery store, they were shot one Christmas Eve during a holdup of their store. What happened?

NGUYEN: I don't know. I was very young when that happened. And I was probably less than 10 years old because I remember I was - it was Christmas Eve. I was watching "Scooby-Doo! Christmas." My brother got a phone call - said to me, hey, mom and dad have been shot. And I had no reaction. I just wanted to watch my cartoon. And it's not that I didn't care. I just - I didn't know what to do with that incident. And then I remember my brother yelling at me because I didn't react.

And it was really difficult, you know, to try to understand what was happening to my parents and to my brother and myself there - that there was violence. It was partly violent because my parents were shopkeepers, and this is what happens to immigrant shopkeepers. They get robbed. They get beaten. They get shot all the time.

But it was also the fact that, I think, a lot of South - a lot of Vietnamese refugees to the United States brought violence with them. There was a lot of domestic violence, a lot of domestic abuse. People were traumatized. They were hurt. They were scared. The men faced downward mobility and alienation. And of course, they took it out on their families - their wives and their children. And these children, a lot of them joined gangs. I was in a so-called gang when I was in the second grade. You know, I mean, it wasn't a real gang, but I got to this public high school. There were Vietnamese kids there. And immediately, we split up into gangs to fight each other.

And that became a much more serious issue with, you know, teenage Vietnamese and younger Vietnamese-American boys who formed real gangs with guns and terrorized the Vietnamese community with this new phenomenon of - called home invasions. And they knew - they did this because they knew that these families kept money in gold at home and that these people were vulnerable. And my parents always told me watch out for Vietnamese people. Do not let them into the house because they may rob us.

And ironically, what happened was that one day, someone knocked on our door when I was 16. And he was not Vietnamese. He was a white guy. And because he was a white guy, one of my parents - I think it was my father - let him in. And that man had a gun. And that man put that - pointed that gun in all of our faces. You know, it was only because my mother ran out into the street screaming that our lives were saved.

GROSS: Wow. It seems just so tragic that you have this community of Vietnamese people who have so much in common. They fled their country for the same reason. They're living together in a community to - in part, to avoid the kind of hostility they may face in the larger American culture. And then they hurt each other.

NGUYEN: Well, it was a revolutionary war. It was a civil war, depending on how you look at it. And what that means is that Vietnamese people were already hurting each other in Vietnam. They'd had a long tradition...

GROSS: Good point (laughter).

NGUYEN: ...Of doing that even before...

GROSS: Right (laughter).

NGUYEN: ...(Laughter) Even before the French came.

GROSS: Right.

NGUYEN: You know, it's a hierarchal feudal society. The Vietnamese were already exploting each other. And then that was exacerbated by colonialism and American occupation - or intervention - however you want to describe it. And so it was ironic and not ironic that when they came to the United States, they would do the exact same thing to each other because in Vietnam during the war years, you know, in order to survive in Vietnam, you had to exploit each other.

It was a country that was corrupted by American aid, and people brought those habits of corruption and brutal competition with them to the U.S. And they also brought the memories of Vietnamese people killing other Vietnamese people to the United States. And I'm sure that affected them and their children and created the conditions for violence and brutality towards each other in this - the very same community, as you said, that was created in order to protect each other.

But that is one of the basic facts of ethnic communities in the United States. They gather together for comfort, but these people who know each other and love each other so well also know where the weak spots are.

GROSS: So I want to get back to your parents being shot when you were 10. So you were watching "Scooby-Doo! Christmas," and you kind of initially paid no attention to it. You just wanted to watch your cartoon. And you don't know the circumstances of this shooting. I understand you were 10 then, but many years have elapsed since then. You've never asked your parents to tell you what happened?

NGUYEN: Yeah. I've asked my parents certain kinds of questions that I thought were the important ones, you know, about their life in general. And then there's certain things that I have - I don't know if I've passed over them deliberately or not. I just - why? Why reopen old wounds? I think that's been my parents' attitude towards many issues.

And I think back to this one particular incident. And I'm like - you know, they were shot. And they weren't shot badly. I mean, they were released from the hospital the next day. But do I really want to go there? Do I really want to talk about this incident? I mean, it's for me to know something, but it's for them to maybe safeguard and protect.

What I do know in general is that their life as shopkeepers was intensely difficult. They literally worked seven days a week every day of the year except Christmas, New Year's and Easter. And they literally worked 12 to 14 hour days. They would work at the store.

And then they would come back. They would cook dinner or barely cook dinner. They were - you know, dinner was a really horrible experience. And then I would help them, you know, do the checks and tabulate the accounts. And, you know, by the time I was 10 or 11, I was helping to do the accounting.

And it was a hard life. And I sympathize with this idea that maybe we shouldn't ask our parents to have to relive the difficult things that they've survived.

GROSS: Were you afraid in the store after that?

NGUYEN: I hated that store. You know, I am thankful to my parents that they were not the kind of - I mean, they made me do certain kinds of things, like do the accounting and all of that. But they rarely actually made me go physically to the store to help them do that kind of work. And I didn't like being there.

And I think they didn't make me do these kinds of things because they wanted me to study. They sacrificed their lives in order for my brother and I to always have food, to always have clothing and to always have an education - and to have religion. Those were their priorities. But they didn't want us to become shopkeepers and to do their kind of work. So fortunately, we were protected from that.

GROSS: My guest is Viet Thanh Nguyen. His novel, "The Sympathizer," won this year's Pulitzer Prize for fiction. We'll talk more after we take a short break. And our TV critic, David Bianculli, will talk about how Jimmy Fallon, James Corden and Jerry Seinfeld's viral videos are changing comedy. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross back with Viet Thanh Nguyen. His novel "The Sympathizer" won this year's Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It's set in Vietnam during the war and in LA just after. The main character is a spy for North Vietnam working undercover as an aide to a general in South Vietnam. Viet Thanh Nguyen was born in South Vietnam. He was 4 in 1975 when the war ended. The North, which was Communist, took over the South. The Americans pulled out. And he and his family fled to the U.S.

Do you remember when you started realizing that there was an enormous conflict in the United States about the war in Vietnam and that the war had really divided America?

NGUYEN: Well, I knew that we were different as Vietnamese people really early. And, you know, soon after I came - we came to San Jose, Calif., - my parents had to open this grocery. And I walked on that street, and I saw a sign in a window that said another American business driven out by Vietnamese people. So that was my first sense that, somehow, we had arrived in a place that looked at us as different. And then not long after that, the VCR arrived on the scene. And I was about 10 years old. We got a VCR.

And one of the first movies that I remember watching was "Apocalypse Now." I was probably about 10. And I think that was the first indication, also, that I had that there was something called this war and that this was how Americans saw this war as one that had divided them. And that was my first glimmering that there was something like a civil war happening in the American soul and that we as Vietnamese people were caught up in that because I watched that movie as a good, American boy who had already seen some American war movies - John Wayne in World War II.

And I was cheering for the American soldiers until the moment in "Apocalypse Now" where they started killing Vietnamese people. And that was an impossible moment for me because I didn't know who I was supposed to identify with, the Americans who were doing the killing or the Vietnamese who were dying and not being able to speak?

And that moment has never left me as the symbolic moment of my understanding that this was our place in an American war, that the Vietnam War was an American war from the American perspective and that, eventually, I would have to do something about that.

GROSS: Well, you kind of work that out a little bit in your new novel because the main character, the spy, after the fall of Saigon when he comes to the U.S., he ends up being an advisor on a film called "The Hamlet," that's very much modeled on "Apocalypse Now." It's like your fictional version of "Apocalypse Now." And in the acknowledgments for your book, you mention, like, a whole bunch of, like, books and movies that you, like, read or watched that have to do with "Apocalypse Now." So your spy is, like, an advisor on this movie. What is expected of him?

NGUYEN: Well, he's an advisor on this movie, which is certainly, you know, clearly alluding to "Apocalypse Now." But it's really a compilation of all the movies that I'd scene about the Vietnam War because "Apocalypse Now" is actually a great movie, even though it traumatized me. And it's a problematic movie. But so many of the movies that were made about the Vietnam War were not that great. And "The Hamlet" is going to be one of these films. But his job on this film is to be the authenticity consultant.

And, you know, his basic understanding of this is that Hollywood is interested in the authenticity of details when it comes to others. So they have to get the right costume down, for example. But they're not interested in the authenticity of the people that they're dealing with. So all of these Vietnamese people who've been brought in to have roles in this American epic about the Vietnam War literally have nothing to say.

Their function is to literally just be stage props for an American drama. And my narrator understands this. And he understands it very intellectually and viscerally that what is happening here is that Hollywood is the unofficial ministry of propaganda for the Pentagon, that its role is to basically prepare Americans to go fight wars by making them focus only on the American understanding of things and to understand others as alien and different and marginal, even to their own histories, right?

And so his belief is that he can somehow try to subvert this ministry of propaganda, this vast war epic that is going to continue to kill Vietnamese people in a cinematic fashion,

which is simply the prelude to actually killing Vietnamese people in real life. So he believes that he can try to make a difference. And, of course, the humor and the tragedy is that he can't.

GROSS: You know, one of the things you say about the war and Hollywood is that, like, this is one war where the losers get to write the story.

NGUYEN: Yeah, and that's one of the tremendous ironies, you know, that the United States lost the war, in fact, in 1975. But for the very same reason that the United States was able to wage a war in which it lost 58,000 American soldiers, which is a human tragedy, but was able to create the conditions by which 3 million Vietnamese people died of all sides and 3 million Laotians and Cambodians died during those years and in the years afterwards.

For the very same reasons that the industrial power of the United States is able to produce this vast inequity of death, that's the same reason that the United States, in the years afterward, through its incredibly powerful cultural industry, is able to win the war in memory because wherever you go outside of Vietnam, you have to deal with American memories of the Vietnam War. Inside Vietnam, you have to confront Vietnamese memories. But outside, wherever I've gone and talked about the Vietnam War and memory, one of the first questions that I get is what do you think of "Apocalypse Now?" So...

(LAUGHTER)

NGUYEN: ...That's what we have to confront - right? - that American soft power is tremendously powerful. And it goes hand-in-hand with American hard power.

GROSS: Of course, so many of the movies made about Vietnam are about the divisions in American about whether it was a just war or not and whether American soldiers committed atrocities or not.

NGUYEN: Yeah, and this is one of the things that people have a hard time getting their minds around. I often get questions, people saying, well, if you look at these Vietnam War movies, Americans come off really badly. And my response to that is, yes, that's true, but they're still the movie stars. And given an option between being a virtuous extra who gets to say nothing and being the demonic antihero who occupies center stage, I think everybody would choose being the demonic antihero. And that's what's happening.

The basic reality of the Vietnam War that Americans can't get around is that it was, in many ways, a really bad war. And so Hollywood has at least acknowledged that much. But the way that it has contained the meaning of that war is to make Americans the stars of this drama and relegate the Vietnamese to the margins, even though in reality, the Vietnamese paid the heaviest price. And that is one of the ways by which cultural power, soft power, prepares Americans to do the same things over again, that now as we

confront the same parallels and analogous situations in the Middle East, the irony is that, you know, it's mostly people from these other countries that are dying.

But Americans are preoccupied with their own experiences. That's an exact replication of the mindset that got us into Vietnam and that has now allowed Americans to remember the Vietnam War in a certain way that makes it an America war.

GROSS: Do you see your novel "The Sympathizer" in part as an answer to that, as an alternative way of seeing the war, a way of seeing it through Vietnamese eyes as opposed to through American eyes?

NGUYEN: You know, absolutely. It's my revenge on Francis Ford Coppola.

GROSS: (Laughter).

NGUYEN: It's my revenge on Hollywood (laughter). And, you know, my lonely, small effort - not even lovely and small. Many Vietnamese-American artists and writers are doing very similar things to try to get Americans to understand that Vietnam is a country and not a war. And they're also trying to get Vietnamese people to understand this war in a different way, too, because the Vietnamese understanding of it in Vietnam is equally problematic from a very different way. But, you know, we write novels. And what that means is my novel, even though it won this prize, is just a book.

And Hollywood produces $200 million, $500 million blockbuster epics that will totally destroy my book.

GROSS: Well, at least your book won the Pulitzer Prize (laughter).

NGUYEN: At least, yeah.

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Viet Thanh Nguyen. And his novel "The Sympathizer" won this year's Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Let's take a short break here, then we'll talk some more. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR, and if you're just joining us my guest is Viet Thanh Nguyen. His novel "The Sympathizer" won this year's Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It's written in the form of a forced confession by a spy for North Vietnam. The novel is about the end of the war from the points of view of Vietnamese characters. Viet Thanh Nguyen fled Vietnam with his family in 1975 after the fall of Saigon, when he was 4 years old. They came to the United States.

Your novel is written in the form of a confession - the confession of a North Vietnamese spy whose name we don't know. And I'm wondering if you read any confessions before writing this book, or if you read what you describe as the discourse of steady groups, committees and parties - parties as in Communist Party, not like New Year's party.

NGUYEN: Right exactly. Well, you know, I certainly knew that the confession or the autobiographical self-criticism was a really important part of Chinese and Vietnamese Communist efforts to reeducate - that's a euphemism - reeducate the people that they had defeated. And I hadn't actually read any of those but I'd heard about them repeatedly. And I had read autobiographical accounts of people who had survived these kinds of reeducation camps or reeducation experiences. So I had a pretty good idea of what these kinds of autobiographies would look like. And to me it seemed like this was a great literary form, to try to adapt and to integrate with the spy story that is a part of the novel because the confession certainly has other roots - Christians have been writing confessions since Saint Augustine, at the very least - and it meshed very well with the idea of a political confession, too. And my narrator struggles with both what it means to be a communist and what it means to be a Catholic.

And the other reason why the confession became really important to the novel is that it's confession written from one Vietnamese person to another Vietnamese person who was the interrogator. And what that meant was that what I could do in the novel was to construct an implied audience of Vietnamese people. So it was Vietnamese people talking to Vietnamese people, which is not how minority literature typically works in this country. Typically if you're a minority writer in this country you're expected to write towards the white audience. I mean, the literary industry is 89 percent white. They're the first line of defense in terms of getting published in this country and minority writers understand that. And I really did not want to write this novel with a first audience of white Americans. I wanted to write it with a first audience of other Vietnamese people. And I knew that this would fundamentally change the way that the novel was written and how it would situate the American readership.

GROSS: You write that your parents are prosperous, your brother is a doctor who leads a White House advisory committee on Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders, you're a professor, you're a novelist, you're a Pulitzer Prize winner, but you say our family story is story of loss and death, for we are here only because the U.S. fought a war that killed 3 million of our countrymen, not counting over 2 million others who died in neighboring Laos and Cambodia. Do often think about what your life would've been like if your family had stayed in Vietnam?

NGUYEN: Well, of course because I have my sister's story as an example. And I have the stories of many, many Vietnamese people who stayed behind or were left behind who are relatives of people who came to the United States or to other countries. And of course for many of them it was a really, really difficult time and a really horrible experience. And I know that when I talk about these kinds of things in this context that what people are hearing in your audience is that my family and myself are examples of the American dream - we've made it, right? And I really resist that idea.

I mean, obviously we're successful and we're successful partially because of the opportunities that America has offered. But, again, it's only possible because of a war that the United States waged in Vietnam. And there are so many Asian immigrants and refugees who have come from countries like the Philippines, Korea, Laos, Cambodia who are here in the United States because of wars that the U.S. waged overseas. And the

difficulty for Americans and for these refugees and immigrants is to think about both of these kinds of things at the same time - economic opportunity domestically in the United States for some Asian immigrants and refugees, not all of them - that are made possible because of foreign wars that the United States have waged abroad.

And the way that I think about it is that I have to insist all the time that I am not an immigrant and that I - the story that I'm telling in my novel is not an immigrant story. I'm a refugee and the story I'm telling is a war story because one of the ways that the United States tries to contain the meaning of these histories is to think that all of these Asians are here because they're immigrants, and that their story begins once they get to the United States. But again, my understanding is that many of these Asians are here because of the consequences of wars. And many immigrant stories and refugee stories need to be understood as war stories.

GROSS: So your first name is Viet, which is I think a very common name for people from Vietnam. It's also the first half of the name of the country that you were born in - Vietnam. What does Viet mean?

NGUYEN: Viet just means the name of the people. So my parents chose for me a very nationalist and patriotic name. And in combination with my last name - Nguyen - I am basically John Smith in Vietnam. But what's also interesting is that, you know, I've always understood that even as common as that name is - my name is for Vietnamese people here in the United States, it's obviously for many Americans - for most Americans - a very foreign name that they have a hard time getting their tongue around. But I've never changed my name because I think for whatever reason, as ambivalent as I feel about coming from Vietnam - especially, you know, when I was an adolescent growing up in the United States - as ambivalent as I felt about it, I also felt that I was Vietnamese. And whether or not Vietnamese people accept me as Vietnamese or see me as authentically Vietnamese, I always felt that there was a part of me that had been marked by being born in Vietnam, that had marked indelibly by being a refugee, by war and that I would not give up my name for anybody. My parents, for example, I think are more pragmatic. They have adopted American names legally, even though they're very, very, very Vietnamese.

GROSS: Really? Your parents changed their names?

NGUYEN: Yeah, they have. They changed their names. I mean, in the Vietnamese community they go by their Vietnamese names. But they're very pragmatic. As business people outside of that community, to do business they go by their American names on their driver's licenses. And I had that option when I - when we became citizens, to change my name. And I thought, maybe I can be Troy.

GROSS: (Laughter).

NGUYEN: Though whatever name I tried - see, you laugh. Nothing sounded right. Nothing sounded right except my own name. So I've always stayed with it despite the minor cost that it might have entailed in terms of not seeming to be quite as American

as everybody else. But obviously the ambition is to make Americans say my name, to make Americans recognize that this is also now an American name. It is also now a French name. It is also now an Australian name. My surname, Nguyen, is the fourth most popular surname in Australia. You know, we've transformed the countries that we've come to and the people who live in these countries will eventually be able to say our names in the same ways that they say Coppola.

GROSS: Well, Viet, thank you so much for talking with us. And congratulations on winning the Pulitzer.

NGUYEN: Thank you so much for having me, Terry. It's been a pleasure.

GROSS: Viet Thanh Nguyen won this year's Pulitzer Prize for fiction for his novel "The Sympathizer." After we take a short break, our TV critic David Bianculli will talk about how James Corden and Jerry Seinfeld's comedies in cars are examples of how the Internet is changing the comedy landscape. This is FRESH AIR.