

# AIMEE PHAN

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## Q&A on THE REEDUCATION OF CHERRY TRUONG

### **What inspired you to write this book?**

I've always been fascinated with multi-generational sprawling narratives that followed a large extended family. In every family, you hear stories that contradict, but also inform one another. One aunt may tell you a story about how a brother betrayed her, and then you hear from that brother and realize the circumstances were really different from his point-of-view, and that this betrayal was actually a sacrifice on his part. Not everyone knows, or cares to know, each other's side, especially if it is your family and you were the one who felt wronged. But from a writer's point-of-view, it's a treasure trove.

I had written several short stories about Vietnamese families, and one day I wondered if they weren't all part of one large family. And suddenly, I could feel the characters converging, and becoming richer and more complex. And that became very inspiring to me—the challenge and prospect of weaving their narratives together.

### **The story of your main protagonist, Cherry Truong, sounds similar to your own—an American born daughter of Vietnamese refugees with a large, extended family. Are you like the main character? How are you different?**

There are some similarities. A lot of Cherry's observations, especially when she is younger, is similar to what I felt when trying to understand the complicated relationships my parents had with their siblings and parents. But in terms of the choices we made in our lives, we're pretty different. She was the all-star child—straight A's, premed, and the baby of the family. I was the oldest and only did well in the humanities in school. I was pretty terrible in math and science, whereas those subjects are Cherry's strengths. It's a big joke in my family that I purposely failed my premed classes at UCLA so that I could be a writer.

### **We do not only hear from Cherry. We also hear from her grandmothers, her cousins and eventually her father. Why are including their voices important?**

I love multiple perspectives. Hearing different sides of a story is something I really enjoyed with my first book, and with this novel about a family's history

containing so many hidden secrets and betrayals, it only made sense that we heard from different people. They all have their own motivations and perspectives that are unique to them, and they all think they are right.

As a child, my parents told me stories about their lives growing up in Vietnam and meeting each other in the Philippines during the war, and I was fascinated that they'd be talking about the same thing, yet their stories never seemed to match up. The way they told them was also very different. My father was more melancholic, more ready to admit his fault in the past (he had a Catholic's guilty soul), while my mother was incredibly emotional and convinced that no matter what the circumstance, that she was always in the right (she had the refugee survivor's toughness.) I came to realize how crucial the storyteller's voice was in any narrative, so I wanted to explore those differences in my novel.

### **Are any of these family stories from your own personal history?**

Emotionally, I feel they are very autobiographical. The trauma, alienation and frustration feel real, because these emotions felt very present in my parents and relatives' lives as they assimilated here in the US. And as young children, watching our parents go through all of this, we couldn't help but internalize their struggles, and carry them with us to this day.

But are these their stories? No. My family never owned a nail salon. My brother has never had a gambling problem and my grandmother was not a loan shark. The novel's family tree may physically look similar to my own, but my relatives do not match up to the characters. My own family is honestly too nice to do some of the things my characters in the novel do. But the characters I have created here do feel very close and real to me.

The area where the novel is a bit autobiographical is the Alzheimer's storyline. Several members of my family have suffered from dementia, and the idea of losing one's memory when Cherry is working so hard to chronicle her family's history was a central conflict in the novel for me.

Some of the chapters' settings have a history of me. My parents took me to the Lourdes sanctuary when I was ten years old (Hoa's chapter three) and I lived in Las Vegas for three years after grad school (Kim-Ly's chapter eight.) I've also been to France several times with my parents, and with my own husband and daughter, and absolutely adore Paris. I would move there permanently if I could.

### **Why does Lum have such a weakness for gambling? Is this a typical issue in the Asian American community?**

Growing up, my father always hated to see us playing cards, even Goldfish. Sometimes he even threw our decks of cards away, banning them from the house. While none of our immediate family had any problems with gambling, there were plenty of stories of excessive gambling with cousins' cousins, or the wife of a

distant uncle. It was always a fear my parents had—similar to any vice such as alcohol or drugs. Gambling had that potential to destroy the lives they'd worked so hard for in America. Yet, it is an attractive activity because it is this shortcut to the American dream, to a lot of money and success. It's ironic—my parents love Las Vegas, they adore the spectacle and the lights. They never visited me more than when I lived in Las Vegas for three years. But they always walk past the casinos to the buffets or the fountain shows. They choose to look beyond the addiction and weaknesses that built the casinos to enjoy what they want to see.

**What is Cherry's reeducation? What does she have to re-learn? How is her reeducation tied to the infamous Vietnamese reeducation camps after the war?**

Like many immigrant families, the journey from motherland to America is not an easy one. It gets even more complicated with larger, extended families, and there are lingering questions, especially for members of the American born generation, who wonder why their parents never talk about their homeland. How did they leave? Why didn't they all come together? What happened to this aunt? Why was that uncle left behind?

And of course, I'm recalling the term "reeducation" because the reeducation camps in post-war Vietnam had a major impact on both families in the novel. Cherry's father and uncles are told by the government that everything they thought about the world was western propaganda, and they needed to reeducate themselves in order to live in the reunited Vietnam. But instead of learning anything, they are harshly punished and suffer at the hands of their former enemies. I found the vast difference between the official intention (to reeducate and reunite with their former wayward South Vietnamese countrymen) and the actual, devastating realities an important theme to explore in the book.

Though Cherry's reeducation is not nearly as treacherous, she also discovers that there are greater consequences to uncovering her family's past than she initially believed. While learning the different stories and secrets of her family's past can certainly be illuminating, it can also be very painful.

**The novel begins with Cherry trying to bring her brother Lum back from Vietnam, where he was exiled as punishment for being too rebellious. Has this happened? Do misbehaving Vietnamese American children get returned to the motherland?**

My parents and other Vietnamese American parents I know did have a running joke with their kids that if they didn't like the way their parents took care of them, or if they were so unhappy with all their freedom in America, then they could just go back to Vietnam. It was a reminder to us that we should be grateful for all we had here, compared to those left behind in the motherland.

When I was in high school, there were these two very smart sisters who were in all the honors classes, always at the top of the student rankings. But one was the good girl who never dated or did any social activities that distracted her from her studies, and the other was considered more rebellious, at least from the Vietnamese parent point-of-view: she wore make-up, had friends who weren't in AP classes, and she had a boyfriend. One year, she didn't return to our school and I learned that her parents had sent her back to Vietnam to live with relatives. No one really talked about it, and I wasn't very close to these girls, but I was always curious about the circumstances behind her departure. While I think her parents' reasons for sending her back are more complicated than a simple return because of bad behavior, symbolically it became important to me.

And now of course, I know that many of my former high school and college classmates have gone back to Vietnam, some to live and make a living. This can be pretty startling to the older Vietnamese American community, who risked so much to come over to America to make a better life for themselves, and now their children are going back with the exact same goal. I think it says a lot about how quickly social politics and cultural circumstances can change within a generation.

### **What do you hope readers take away from reading this novel?**

I think what's bothered me about the dominant portrayal of Vietnamese people in popular culture is that we are always defined by the war. The war has hurt us, the war continues to hurt us. And while the war certainly colors our history, our stories are actually much richer and more complicated than merely being victims or refugees. We are just as capable of committing generous or terrible acts, and throughout our lives, we will do both. We have the capacity to protect or damage the ones we love, just like anyone else, through our self-interests and desires. I don't think we always understand that our parents and grandparents were once young, and also endured the same kinds of doubts and choices that we are going through. I think it's easier to think they were always one way.

Cherry's journey changed for me during the eight years I was writing this novel. I really grew up with her perspective and realized the goal she had about learning everything she could about her family is not this simple, satisfying accomplishment, even though she still feels compelled to do it.

I think we all come to these kinds of realizations with our families. I always believed that the greatest pain and greatest comfort I've ever experienced in my life came from my parents. My mother always knew just what to say to hurt me the most, but also, several hours later, could say what she needed to make me feel better. Our family members certainly do wield the greatest emotional power over us, and the effect is pretty far-reaching. This is the beautiful benefit and burden of being in a family.