



Kim Thúy's autobiographical debut novel, *Ru*, describes a life-changing voyage from a childhood in strife-filled postwar Vietnam to a new beginning in 1970s Quebec. Unflinching in content and strikingly unique in form, the novel is itself an ambitious journey. Despite some moments of digression and occasional instances of thematic overreach, *Ru* is a poetic and highly individual exploration of what it can mean to straddle multiple cultures and identities simultaneously. The word "Ru" is Vietnamese for lullaby. In French it can signify a stream or flow. A fitting title for this book, given both Ru's haunting and incantatory writing style and the migratory passage the Montreal-based novelist describes. Sensitively rendered in English by celebrated translator Sheila Fischman, Thúy's novel originated with a French edition that won the Governor General's Literary Award for fiction in 2010. Although the first-person narrator of *Ru* identifies herself in the novel's opening pages as a woman named Nguyen An Tinh, the author has told the Quebec press that the book's events accurately reflect her personal recollections of a life characterized by dramatic environmental shifts. That harrowing travelogue includes fleeing from an opulent lifestyle as a South Vietnamese child of privilege, to an overcrowded Malaysian refugee camp, to eventual settlement in and acculturation to Bill 101-era Quebec. In unadorned and dignified prose, Thúy spares no detail about the harsh passage by overfull boat, marked by abundances of scabies and excrement, and equal measures of terror and hope.

With uneven page breaks and ragged-right typography throughout, *Ru* visually resembles a short collection of prose poetry. Clocking in at barely more than 140 pages, the novel is divided into short, standalone sections, the majority of which take up less than a full page. Featuring lengthy sentences of poetical cadence, the novel is propelled not by a linear chronology of events but by one image triggering another. A visual cue, a scent, or a turn of phrase connects each section of text to the preceding one, disrupting the reader's sense of time and simulating the ebb and flow of personal reminiscence.

This stylistic decision allows Thúy leeway to explore issues and experiences in a more imagistic, less documentary fashion. She moves back and forth between a young life of comparative luxury and challenging encounters with Communist soldiers, from the journey to Canada and raising bicultural children with a Québécois husband, to an eventual return to Vietnam for several years as an adult. Focused on the personal, her subtle expressions of politics avoid land mines of dogma or didacticism. In her even-handed view, an impoverished leftist guerrilla unable to identify the Parisienne brassieres in her family's armoire is no better or worse than her father, a tennis aficionado who "talked about Proust while he ate madeleines." Both are sons of Vietnam, each forged by circumstance.

The details of the author's life story are by their nature thematically rich, and Thúy effectively exploits their potential. A trek that begins in a partitioned Vietnam and ends here in a nation famous for its "two solitudes," *Ru* deftly reflects upon the notion of bifurcated identities. The complexities of acculturation are revealed throughout the narrative, as in an anecdote about a Québécois child who affectionately rubs the head of a Vietnamese teammate when the boy catches his first football. The boy responds with rage to a move meant to be congratulatory — for in the culture of his birth, that gesture is a grave insult.

Having arrived in Canada at age 10, Thúy represents the so-called "1.5 generation" immigrant experience, and the attendant blend of new and old cultures. Her protagonist's immediate family is a mix of Vietnamese and Chinese ethnicity, which has implications in terms of political and career choices. The character's children Henri and Pascal have a white father so they, too, are ethnically mixed. Another key theme of *Ru* is coming to terms with the experience of parenthood after surviving a childhood marked not only by extreme trauma but a strict and domineering mother.

Though Thúy handles all those topics well, there is only so much thematic weight such a slim volume can realistically support. *Ru* falters when the author attempts to address a raft of other

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issues that lie too far outside the scope of her personal story — from Western sex tourism and child sexual abuse to the fate of interracial offspring of American GIs. These are important topics — for some other book. Here, their passing mention is ineffective and distracting. Similarly, a number of sections of the story, such as one-off anecdotes regarding neighbours and distant relatives, are digressive and add little in the way of plot, theme or mood.

Such complaints notwithstanding, *Ru* marks the introduction of a talented voice. While the experience of people of Vietnamese descent in Canada and in particular Quebec has been the subject of much attention in the social sciences, this book is our country's first literary glimpse into a significant aspect of our cultural fabric. A meditative and thoughtful first novel, *Ru* is worthy of attention.

Ru By Kim Thúy
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Courtesy: <http://arts.nationalpost.com/2012/02/03/book-review-ru-by-kim-thuy/>

The Star.Com: Q&A: Kim Thúy's best-selling refugee odyssey, makes its mark in English

By Greg Quill

National Post.Com: Book Review: Ru, by Kim Thúy

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