



Stealing Buddha's Dinner: A Memoir

By Bich Minh Nguyen

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Stealing Buddha's Dinner: A Memoir By Bich Minh Nguyen

As a Vietnamese girl coming of age in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Nguyen is filled with a rapacious hunger for American identity, and in the pre-PC-era Midwest (where the Jennifers and Tiffanys reign supreme), the desire to belong transmutes into a passion for American food. More exotic- seeming than her Buddhist grandmother's traditional specialties, the campy, preservative-filled "delicacies" of mainstream America capture her imagination.

In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, the glossy branded allure of Pringles, Kit Kats, and Toll House Cookies becomes an ingenious metaphor for Nguyen's struggle to become a "real" American, a distinction that brings with it the dream of the perfect school lunch, burgers and Jell- O for dinner, and a visit from the Kool-Aid man. Vivid and viscerally powerful, this remarkable memoir about growing up in the 1980s introduces an original new literary voice and an entirely new spin on the classic assimilation story.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Nguyen was just eight months old when her father brought her and her sister out of Vietnam in 1975. The family relocated in Michigan, where young Bich (pronounced "bit") wrestled with conflicting desires for her grandmother's native cooking and the American junk food the "real people" around her ate. The fascination with Pringles and Happy Meals is one symptom of the memoir's frequent reliance on the surface details of pop culture to generate verisimilitude instead of digging deeper into the emotional realities of her family drama, which plays out as her father drinks and broods and her stepmother, Rosa, tries to maintain a tight discipline. Readers are inundated with the songs Nguyen heard on the radio and the TV shows she watched—even her childhood thoughts about *Little House on the Prairie*—but tantalizing questions about her family remain unresolved, like why her father and stepmother continued to live together after their divorce. The mother left behind in Saigon is a shadowy presence who only comes into view briefly toward the end, another line of inquiry Nguyen chooses not to pursue too deeply. The passages that most intensely describe Nguyen's childhood desire to assimilate compensate somewhat for such gaps, but the overall impression is muted. (Feb. 5)

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Bich Minh Nguyen's humorous coming-of-age tale mines themes of loss and identity by cleverly retelling anecdotes in chapters dealing with—or gleefully obsessing over?—particular American foods. Her prose is engaging, and half the fun is reliving with her the pop culture of the 1980s. Rosa's role as "mom"/tyrant/activist is rich and resonating, but critics were split over the effect of Nguyen's birth mother, whose fleeting appearance is powerful but unexplained. The novel's chronology also caused some confusion. Still, this impressive book, Nguyen's first, won the PEN/Jerard Award and sets the stage for a much-anticipated follow-up from this professor of literature and creative writing at Purdue.

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From [Booklist](#)

"I came of age before ethnic was cool," the author writes in her carefully crafted memoir of growing up in western Michigan as a Vietnamese refugee in the early 1980s. Swimming in "a sea of blond," Nguyen recalls she often felt as if she were "dreaming in wheat." No matter that they're mixed, the metaphors powerfully convey the author's experience of being an outsider—not only because she was a Vietnamese surrounded by Dutch descendants but also because she was an incipient writer: "My role was to be out of the way, apart and observing." What seems most to have caught her eye and fired her imagination, then as now, was food, which not only provides the title for each chapter of the memoir but also serves as a convenient shorthand for the cultural (and metaphorical) differences between Toll House cookies and green sticky rice cakes, between Pringles and *chao gio*, between American and Vietnamese. It's a clever device and--like the book itself--leaves the reader hungry for more. *Michael Cart*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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