



# THE LOTUS EATERS

by Tatjana Soli

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## *A Conversation with Tatjana Soli*

**What made you obsessed with the idea of a female photojournalist in Vietnam? Why this topic—and why at this time?**

I was always obsessed with Vietnam. My mother worked for NATO and then at Fort Ord, so the military—soldiers leaving, families breaking up—was real to me even though I was a small child and didn't understand what it was about. But when I grew up, I read all I could in order to understand. Discovering that a few women covered the war as reporters was that magic piece that suddenly turned it into the inspiration for a novel.

*“I wanted a book about war that was rooted in the place where it happened.”*

I get nervous trying to figure out why I write about certain subjects, but I will explore two things. One, that there were parts of the war that I had never seen addressed before. I wanted a book about war that was rooted in the place where it happened. War does not occur on a stage set, or in a neutral vacuum, but on someone's birthplace, in their home, where their families live. If it's not on one's own home turf, it's easy to take this all for granted.

Two, I think the reason that a photographer working in a war zone appealed to me is because I wanted to explore what it means to bear witness. I admire journalists tremendously; I'm in awe of what they do. But I also wanted to explore what that kind of work does to one. There are very few that can keep at it for sustained periods. The burnout is incredibly high. What is the dark side to having this altruistic impulse? And, of course, as in any other profession, there are those in it for the wrong reasons. I wanted to show that too.

The timing was an accident. The novel took ten years, from start to publication. Since 2000, the world, in terms of the United States involved in foreign conflicts, has changed tremendously. And yet there are so many parallels between today and the Vietnam War that you could almost view it as a cautionary tale.



## About the Author

**You spent ten years writing and researching your novel, which is haunting, alive, and quite extraordinary. What sustained you during all those years of writing? Was there ever a point where you felt completely lost or like giving up?**

Well, I can assure you if I had known it would take all these years, it would have been bad. Ignorance is bliss. What sustained me is that I loved the story—this was something that I wanted to live out in the process of writing it. As hard as it is to write something and have it not see publication, if it's deeply important to you, I don't think it's time wasted. Like everyone else, I was really moved by Paul Harding's story, winning the Pulitzer with his novel, *Tinkers*. It was the same novel, when it languished in a drawer for three years, when it was published by a small house, and now that it's won the Pulitzer. As a writer, you have to learn to value your work independently from what happens to it out in the world, but at the same time you don't want to be delusional. It's a hard balance to maintain.

**What surprised you about your research, particularly with female war photographers?**

There were many interesting things about the handful of women photographers who covered Vietnam. The two that I focused on, Dickey Chapelle and Catherine Leroy, went out of their way to appear tough, to measure up to the men. Dickey Chapelle was more a product of post-WWII. She was anticommunist and pro-military, and she bought into the heroism aspect of the war. She was only there for the beginning of Vietnam, but she thought America was right to be there.

Catherine Leroy went on to cover other wars. After covering Lebanon, she swore off war coverage totally. This is just me guessing, but I think something broke in her. After all the awards she had won, the hopelessness, the endless cycle of war, destroyed her. If there was one person I would have wanted to talk to at length before writing the book, it would have been Catherine.

*“The only thing to counteract all the darkness of violence is connection, love, to another human being.”*

**Can you talk about the title, please, and its meaning in the novel?**

*The Lotus Eaters* [from Homer’s *Odyssey*] forget all thoughts of home. But “home” means more than a physical place. It is a mental place of comfort and familiarity; it is a belief system. Once you really “see,” in a deep sense, the injustices of the world, can you go back to a place of blindness? Can you go back to living out your private, happy life? The addiction to the adrenaline of war is superficial compared to that.

The only thing to counteract all the darkness of violence is connection, love, to another human being. But you are grabbing it like a lifeline, so there is obsession involved. This is the only person in the world who has been through what you have, a bond that can’t be shared with many others.

**Why did you begin the novel with the fall of Saigon and then backtrack to tell Helen’s story? How did that particular structure impact your story?**

My interest was in Helen at this particular moment in her life, a telling one both personally and historically. That’s the engine that fuels the search into the past. I’ve been writing about the iconic war photographs of that time, but the whole fall of Saigon, the pictures of the crowds beating against the embassy gates, helicopters taking off from the rooftops, it’s one of those moments in history that you never come to the end of. In some ways, it represents the whole disaster of the war. The rest of the novel is an exploration of how this moment came to pass. Character is revealed in the difficult moments in life, not when it’s all smooth sailing.

I hope that structuring the book in the way I did throws the interest on how the characters change and develop rather than the false glamour of war and combat. Unlike the outcome of a sports game, you are being told at the very start who lost. With that out of the way, let’s find out who these people are. Because that’s the real explanation of war, not the outcomes of battles.



## About the Author

**Photojournalists are often witnesses to history, rather than part of it—and sometimes there's a cost to that. Can you talk about that a bit?**

That's a complicated question. There's a school of thought that it is more professional to stay outside of events, to not take a position, so to speak. To be neutral, as if there was such a thing. I think that people who do this are trying to protect themselves from being affected by events. The more I read about photojournalists, the more I understood that there is a price to bearing witness. You are part of it, whether you want to be or not. There is the bitterness of being helpless to change the outcome. Of seeing things you can't recover from. I think that's what happened to Catherine Leroy. There's another way, one of my favorite examples, of doing what is within your ability. Nick Ut saved the little girl, Kim Phuc, who was burned by napalm. He became her lifelong friend. It's what was within his ability to do. Sometimes saving one person is enough.

**I'm intensely curious about what topic is obsessing you now for your next book?**

After a novel that required so much in terms of research about place, time, photography, and the military, I wanted to set myself a different kind of technical challenge with my second novel. It is set on a citrus ranch in present-day California. But my obsession is with the two main characters. Issues of race and power and identity that actually aren't so different than in my first novel.

**What question should I be mortified that I didn't ask?**

You asked such good questions! I'd like to add a lifestyle question, in terms of balance in the writing life. I believe that you should be absolutely obsessed by your work, and then at the end of your work time, let it go. Each day I take a long hike with my husband and my dog. *I don't have time for it, there are about a thousand things that need to get done NOW*, but we take our hike. Make sure you have a release valve.



## *An Original Essay by the Author*

### **“Silencing the Voices of No”**

Almost ten years ago when I first got the idea of writing a story about the Vietnam War from the perspective of a female photojournalist—a woman seeking her destiny within the war—the reception was lukewarm to say the least. I was told that Vietnam was considered a niche audience, all military and all male, and that a woman’s perspective, not a soldier’s, would be too limiting. Discouraged, I moved on to other projects.

But I live in Orange County, California, where the city of Westminster—Little Saigon—is home to the largest Vietnamese community outside of Vietnam. In the local newspaper, stories from after the war are frequent, stories of leaving one’s homeland and starting life anew. Individual stories of adversity and triumph. So I began writing the stories of Vietnamese immigrants coming to the United States. The idea of the war could not be left behind, it just came out a new way.

The stories started in Orange County, but they migrated across the ocean, moved backward in time. One dealt with a man who escaped on the boats and landed in the refugee camp of Pulau Bidong, Malaysia. It got to the level of an obsession. One of my favorite compliments from this time was when a literary quarterly editor knocked on my door at a writers’ conference and was shocked when I answered. She thought I was Vietnamese and had an exotic European name. My stories got closer and closer to Vietnam, closer and closer to the time of the fall of Saigon. My first character for the novel formed—Linh, a gentle, young poet, who leaves his home to avoid the war. So I began the book, not because the idea had been green-lighted or there was an enthusiastic agent or editor waiting for it, but because I couldn’t bear not to.

The dedication of my novel reads:

*To my mom,  
who taught me about  
brave girls crossing oceans.*

*No matter how  
un-autobiographical,  
[a] book  
contains  
your essence.”*



## *Behind the Novel*

It's a cliché to liken the publication of a book to the birth of a child. But I will say that it's an extremely moving moment the first time you hold your book. It represents not only a great sacrifice of time out of your life, but also a sacrifice from those around you. Absent spouse, uncooked meals, uncleaned house, spotty social life. No matter how un-autobiographical, the book contains your essence—maybe not in location, history, or plot—but in the way that characters move through the world, the way language unspools on the page. When I received my advanced reader's copies last fall, it was the culmination of many things for me. I sat my mother down, opened the book to the dedication page, and gave it to her. I had kept what I had written a surprise. She cried, as mothers do. Of course, she was proud of her daughter, but it was more than that.

My mother had left Austria as a single mother and come to the United States not knowing anyone. People told her she was foolish, that it was a reckless undertaking with a small child, but she was determined. She wanted a better life for us. Although she has flourished, I think in the back of every immigrant's heart there is this doubt, this uncertainty that one will never truly belong. In my mom's case, there is an overwhelming love for her new country that has given her so much, even as there is sadness at what was left behind. You see, once you've left your home, your heart cannot be whole again. I cannot imagine being so brave.

Because my mother would not listen to the naysayers, because she taught me not to take no for an answer, I kept writing a story I wanted to tell. *The Lotus Eaters* came out on the thirty-fifth anniversary of the fall of Saigon. Because our country is involved in other problematic foreign wars, Vietnam is again seen to be current, if not prophetic. If one didn't know better, it almost seems planned. And yet it all boils down to the personal. It all comes down to one woman—my mother, me, the character, Helen, in my book—seeking her destiny against all odds.

Although I've included a bibliography of the books I read while researching *The Lotus Eaters*, here is a more general list of books on Vietnam and the war.

I've included some "musts" but also some more eclectic, lesser-known works.

*The Things They Carried*

Tim O'Brien

If you want the single more important fictional book on the soldier's experience in Vietnam, you will not do better than this book. Read it once and then read it again and again because it will teach you everything about Vietnam, the war, soldiers, writing, and "the human heart in conflict with itself." It is filled with pain and compassion and unbearable beauty.

*Going After Cacciato, In the Lake of the Woods,  
and If I Die in a Combat Zone,  
Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*

Tim O'Brien

If you are hooked on O'Brien from the above, as you should be, then continue on with this crash course into the war. In his memoir, *If I Die . . .*, O'Brien explains his idea of story truth versus real truth: "Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories." *Cacciato* is a complex novel about the human imagination in the face of the brutality of war. *In the Lake of the Woods* is a novel not overtly about the war, but rather its repercussions, its mysteries, and the impossibility of there being one final truth to any story. There is an image of the main character pouring boiling water over houseplants that is as eerie and violent as any I've come across.

*Dog Soldiers*

**Robert Stone**

The war provides a perfect catalyst to the archetypal, flawed [Stone] character in this novel.

It is about people making the wrong decisions, and events larger than themselves taking over their lives. Stone is a master of mixing the personal and the political, and his prose is a thing of beauty.

*Dispatches*

**Michael Herr**

This is a wonderful collection of Herr's articles written for *Esquire*. In addition to expressing his empathy for the soldier's experience and sharing his insights into the counterculture, Herr portrays the paradoxical high that he and other journalists experienced during their time covering the war. This quote captures it perfectly:

"Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods."

*Requiem*

**Horst Faas and Tim Page**

This is a book of photography taken in Vietnam and Indochina by photographers who were killed in the conflict. Many of the pictures are the iconic ones we all know while others are little known, including ones from Vietnamese and Cambodian photographers. This was the book where I first discovered the picture of Dickey Chapelle. Amazing production values, a real piece of history.

*The Sacred Willow*

**Duong Van Mai Elliott**

This is a compelling family saga of four generations of a Vietnamese family. While it portrays the complexity of how the Vietnamese felt about "the American war," it avoids the political and focuses on the human.

*Keep on  
Reading*

*Perfect Spy: The Incredible Double Life  
of Pham Xuan An*

Larry Berman

Although I knew from my research that An was a *Time* correspondent, a friend to many significant American journalists in Vietnam, and later revealed to be a spy for the Communists, this book was unavailable to me until a few months ago. Fascinating.

*Fire in the Lake*

Frances FitzGerald

One of the most balanced, comprehensive studies on the war in that it explores the history of Vietnam, the culture, colonialism, and the American involvement. Essential reading.

*Sensing the Enemy and After Sorrow*

Lady Borton

These are memoirs by a remarkable woman, one of the few Americans to work both in South and North Vietnam during the war. Borton, a Quaker, worked in a refugee camp for the boat people and escorted the first journalists to the scene of the massacre at My Lai. A rare insight.

*An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems*

Huynh Sanh Thông

Because there is no better way to understand a people than through their art.



1. Soli pulled the novel's title, *The Lotus Eaters*, from an episode in Homer's *The Odyssey* and uses Homer's description of the land of the lotus eaters as the novel's opening epigraph. What connection do you see between Homer's lotus eaters and the main characters of this novel? What, if anything, in this novel acts like the lotus described by Homer, so powerful and seductive it causes one to abandon all thoughts of home? Does each character have a different "lotus" that draws them in? How does the title illuminate the main themes of the novel?
2. The novel begins with the fall of Saigon, and then moves back in time twelve years to the beginning of the war. How do you think this structure contributed to your experience of the novel? Did this glimpse of Helen in 1975 influence how you related to her character at earlier points in her life? Did knowing the outcome affect your judgment of her actions and the action of those around her?
3. Helen makes a pivotal decision at the end of Chapter One—to send Linh on the plane and stay behind to "see it end." Why does she make this decision? How did you feel about it? Did your feelings about it change over the course of the novel?
4. What does Helen think of Vietnam and the Vietnamese people when she first arrives in Saigon? How do her feelings evolve throughout the novel? How does this evolution affect how she comes to view the war and her role in it?
5. In Chapter Three, Darrow says, "The cool thing for us is that when this one's done, there's always another one. . . . The war doesn't ever have to end for us." Why does he say this to Helen? What does it show about how Darrow views the war and about Darrow himself? When Helen repeats these words back to him in Chapter Eleven, how has their meaning changed?

*Keep on  
Reading*

6. In Chapter Nineteen, Helen believes that “Violence had poisoned them all . . .” In what ways are Darrow, Helen, and Linh poisoned? What, if anything, keeps each of them from being destroyed by it?
7. Throughout the novel, Helen finds herself in love, and loved by, two very different men. How would you characterize each of her relationships? Did you prefer Helen in one relationship over the other? What are each relationship’s strengths and weaknesses? Which man do you ultimately believe is Helen’s great love?
8. Mark Twain said, “Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear.” Bravery and courage are frequently mentioned in the novel. In what ways do the various characters display these traits? In what ways do they fail?