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Caught in the Maelstrom

By Lynda Grace Philippsen

The Time in Between

David Bergen,

Random House, 2005, hardcover, 273 pp.

Often the characters that populate the spare and elegant lines of Canadian writer David Bergen's latest novel *The Time in Between* repel the reader. What is beautiful is the dark and luminous art that renders their suffering. With a cinematographer's eye and a calligrapher's hand Bergen compels the reader to enter their blighted lives and exit with a deeper understanding of what it is to be caught in the maelstrom of war and its aftermath.

The time in question is the period between two deaths: that of a North Vietnamese boy and the suicide, thirty years later, of Charles Boatman, the American who killed him. The intricately-threaded narrative never falters, shifting seamlessly from past to present;

across the geography of Viet Nam, Seattle, and Sumas Mountain, Canada; between generations of both Eastern and Western cultures.

At age forty-eight, in an attempt to make sense of what happened, Charles returns to Viet Nam "as a tourist." He remembers that "after the shooting stopped ...they chased the remaining villagers out into the fields and called in an air strike. And everything disappeared. The boy that he had shot. The old woman that someone else had shot. All of that disappeared."

"Only it didn't." Bergen sets that line alone in its own paragraph. Like an accusation it informs the densely-corded stories within stories that form the book. Subtle and intricate, *The Time in Between* can be understood at many levels. Its boy represents every boy; its conflicts, symbols, and characters with all their needs, contradictions, and flaws reveal the dissonant facets of the human condition. The simple and often breathtaking prose belies the complexity of the ideas and quiet condemnation it contains.

For thirty years, waking and sleeping, Charles obsesses over the boy who didn't have a gun or shoes. "Maybe it wasn't even a boy." Still, enemy civilians are not necessarily harmless. A little boy whose "shorts with front pockets... bulged slightly Charles thought later, if he wanted to believe something" could have held grenades.

But when Charles returns to the scene, nothing looks as it did thirty years before, no one in the village was there at the time, and anyone who can remember the war wants to forget. A symbol of art and philosophy's futility, Hoang Vu, a living casualty of the war and failed wastrel observes that men who survived the war have "no wish to tunnel back through the years." They are content to eat, to "sleep in a dry bed, and have regular bowel movements."

In addition to Charles's need for resolution, the search for the absent father (an unrewarding exercise with symbolic overtones) is a *leitmotif* that drives the narrative. Ada Boatman and her brother Jon travel to Viet Nam to look for their father, after he is reported missing by his hotel. Over a period of three weeks they contact a series of people who had met him before his disappearance: his interpreter Vo Van Thanh, Vu, missionary Jack Gouds and his unhappy wife Elaine.

In the way of Westerners with no world view other than their own, Ada exhibits an appalling lack of awareness. She fails to take rudimentary precautions — including unprotected sex with Vu whose penchant for foreign women is common knowledge. Jon, who has recently separated from his partner, spends much of his time in a series of affairs including one with Jack, "possibly the most dangerous kind of man, [one who] believed in doing good."

Both the Vietnamese and the Western characters serve their own ends taking what they can from each other. Tension pings in the intervals between reality and illusion, truth and falsehood, fate and choice, actions and words, characterizing the distances between them. Their liaisons reverberate with emptiness.

Another compelling presence in the novel is a North Vietnamese writer, Duang Tho. This fictional character is a recognizable nod to Bao Ninh, whose renowned work *The Sorrow of War* Bergen acknowledges as a significant influence. "Writing in the voice of a North Vietnamese soldier" is where he admits he "took the biggest chance."

Charles the war veteran finds an affinity with Kiet, the eighteen-year old North Vietnamese deserter and narrator of Tho's book *In a Dark Wood*. Just as Charles had not wanted to be drafted, "[Kiet] had not planned to desert. It simply became a fact when he realized that he was walking away." Nonetheless, the hapless choice propels him

like “a rat tunnelling his way from one disaster to another.” Having slit the throat of a baby and its young mother because the child’s cries threatened to give away his presence, he maintains that he “had no choice.” But the careful reader knows otherwise.

In one of numerous poignant moments, Charles, once he decides to take his own life, moves toward that goal with inexorable energy, surmounting the obstacles in his path with a purpose he has never given to his life. Bergen’s subtle indictment of war is evident in the realization that if one can choose to die, one can choose to die rather than kill. That, however, defies the biological imperative. It is unnatural. The choice is hell either way. As Thanh tells Charles, “All prisons are the same, only some are a little bit worse.” By simply being human, all are confined — first by birth, finally by death, and by the time in between.