



# Voyages of hope and fear

## REFUGEES

**BOAT PEOPLE: Personal Stories from the Vietnamese Exodus 1975-1996.** Edited by Carina Hoang. Fremantle Press. 256pp. \$45.

Reviewer: KIM HUYNH

**R**efugees who are fortunate enough to find new homes and rebuild their lives tend to fall into two categories. The majority almost never speak of their persecution and displacement. They see little benefit and significant risk in reliving past pains. Often they suspect that people who were indifferent to their plight then would care even less now. Then there are those who have a burning desire to bear witness. These individuals believe that all who are like them must speak and all others should listen. They believe that through acts of remembering we give future generations the best chance of avoiding the calamities of history.

Carina Hoang falls squarely into the latter category. This ample and engaging book addresses her concern that "the world might never know", or perhaps come to forget, about the sufferings, courage and sacrifices of the million or so Vietnamese boat people. Hoang left Vietnam at the age of 16 in a rickety wooden boat with her two younger siblings and 400 other desperate people. After resettling in the United States, she attained a chemistry degree and MBA and held management positions before moving to Perth with her family. She has her own communications company, helps boat people find the graves of loved ones and is completing her PhD dissertation, elements of which can be found in *Boat People*.

This is not like other biographical collections. It is an illustrated book, which is to say that the memories of Vietnamese boat people are presented in short memoirs and illustrations. The photographs compel us to ask, "What led these people to take such risks?" and "How did they endure such hardship?" There are images of boat hulls crammed full of people, their grimy limbs tightly entwined and their faces either contorted in agony or blank with acceptance. There are many photographs from refugee identification cards that show people freshly plucked from the ocean. They are holding blackboards that state their name, date of birth and the registration number of the boat on which they arrived. Whether it is baby Lam Quang Minh (born in 1978) or grandmother Quan My (born circa 1899), they all have something in common. There is not the slightest hint of a grin or relief at coming to the end of an ordeal. Instead, their gaze reveals both an acceptance of harsh fate and a determination to face whatever the future holds. I have

seen that same haunting look in the identification pictures taken of my family when we first arrived at a Malaysian refugee camp in 1979.

There are also reproductions of primary documents. Envelopes adhered to pages are marked "Confidential", inviting us to peer inside. They contain refugee acceptance letters and personal notes to loved ones, all of which changed the trajectory of people's lives. These documents, presented as time capsules, put us in the shoes of both the refugees and the researchers on their respective journeys of escape and discovery. Hoang and her design team have put together a beautiful work that can be read from cover to cover, but also used as a coffee table book which can be dipped into for jolts of inspiration; some pages come with faux coffee-mug stains so you don't even have to wear it in.

Another distinctive and valuable feature of this book is that it includes accounts not only from refugees, but those who had close and sustained dealings with them: social workers, journalists, diplomats and bureaucrats, contributors and fuller narratives.

As a Vietnamese boat person, it is impossible to read this book and not make comparisons. The fearful secrecy of organising escape, the perilous voyage and at times bleak wait in refugee camps are familiar to my family and many other Indo-Chinese boat people. But there are also some horrific and heroic accounts that makes one wonder whether some people are made of a different mettle. There were individuals who tried to escape a dozen times before getting out of Vietnam, women who were repeatedly raped and beaten, and a boat that was attacked and ransacked by Thai pirates seven times in 10 hours. Shern Nguyen kept his sons alive by feeding them a rambutan seed a day and tricking them into drinking his urine. Single mother Thien Nga Le and her three youngest children spent two weeks at sea in a tiny boat with only the stars and their prayers to guide them.

**T**his book is obviously sympathetic to the refugees, but it is not a hagiography. There are brief references to theft, treachery and even cannibalism which remind us that adversity accentuates both the best and worst sides of human nature.

It is also difficult not to compare and contrast the current wave of boat people arriving on Australia's shores. The fundamental forces that drove the Indo-Chinese boat people of the late 20th century, and Iraqi and Afghan boat people of the early 21st century, to leave their homes and risk their lives are by and large identical: all are pushed out by oppression and drawn towards the prospect of freedom and security. In all cases the boat people came from countries in which Australian armed



Boat People editor Carina Hoang, above, being processed as a refugee at the age of 16 in 1963.



Each story is unique and compelling. However, if there is a weakness, it is that Hoang offers us morsels rather than mains. It might have been more satiating to have included fewer

forces were committed to a professed fight against tyranny. Australia resettled almost 111,000 Indo-Chinese refugees from 1975 to 1995 and, while there was a great deal of debate and consternation over this historic intake of foreigners, these boat people did not evoke the sort of uproar and controversy that we have seen in recent years.

The shift in perception towards boat people is alluded to in Hoang's book. By international decree, those who landed on foreign shores before June 15, 1989, were presumed to be "refugees" and therefore did not have to fear forced repatriation. Those who came afterwards were "asylum seekers" who were screened to ensure that they were not economic migrants and in it for the money. During the Cold War, entrepreneurialism was a sign of a displaced person's commitment to liberal capitalist freedoms; after the Cold War, it was a sign of greed. Boat people have since dropped even further in our esteem so that today they are commonly referred to as "illegals" and sometimes perceived to be threats to our security and wellbeing.

Another important difference between then and now is that the vast majority of Indo-Chinese boat people who Australia took in came in a somewhat orderly process via camps in South-East Asia. Only 1750 arrived directly on our shores. So, clearly the issue of who decides who comes to this country and the means by which they come is of great significance to many Australians.

In years to come, there will surely be books and works like Hoang's that reflect upon the ordeals of contemporary boat people, if only because there is always someone who must bear witness. One wonders what they will say, and how they will judge us.

• Kim Huynh is author of *Where the Sea Takes Us: A Vietnamese-Australian Story* (Fourth Estate, 2008). His most recent article, "Refugeeness: What's good and not so good about being persecuted and displaced?", appears in *Local-Global* journal.